

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



131 206

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

BOOKS BY
GILBERT FRANKAU

Novels

THE WOMAN OF THE HORIZON
PETER JACKSON, CIGAR MERCHANT
THE SEEDS OF ENCHANTMENT
THE LOVE STORY OF ALIETTE BRUNTON
GERALD CRANSTON'S LADY
LIFE—AND ERICA
MASTERTSON
SO MUCH GOOD
DANCE! LITTLE GENTLEMAN
MARTIN MAKE-BELIEVE
CHRISTOPHER STRONG
THE LONELY MAN
EVERYWOMAN
THREE ENGLISHMEN
FAREWELL ROMANCE
THE DANGEROUS YEARS
ROYAL REGIMENT
SELF-PORTRAIT

Collections of Tales

MEN, MAIDS, AND MUSTARD-POT
TWELVE TALES
CONCERNING PETER JACKSON AND OTHERS
WINE, WOMEN, AND WAITERS
SECRET SERVICES
EXPERIMENTS IN CRIME

Book of Travel

MY UNSENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

Verse

ONE OF US
MORE OF US
TID'APA
THE GUNS
THE JUDGEMENT OF VALHALLA
THE CITY OF FEAR
ONE OF THEM

AIR MINISTRY—ROOM 28

GILBERT FRANKAU'S

AIR MINISTRY
ROOM 28

NEW YORK · 1942

E. P. DUTTON & CO., INC.

Copyright, 1942
By E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.
Printed in the U.S.A.

First Printing, January 1942
Second Printing, January 1942
Third Printing, January 1942
Fourth Printing, January 1942
Fifth Printing, January 1942
Sixth Printing, January 1942
Seventh Printing, January 1942

All rights reserved—no part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in magazine or newspaper or radio broadcast.

*This novel is published in England
under the title WINTER OF DISCONTENT*

AMERICAN BOOK—STRATFORD PRESS, INC., NEW YORK

To

LOUISE BOULTON

thanking her for a kindness.

FOREWORD

I FINISHED my last book three years ago, during the January of 1939. July of that year found me in the United States. By August I was home, and a Staff Officer of the Royal Air Force. I was invalided from the Service on the last day of 1940. Accordingly, I have returned to the storyteller's craft.

This particular story was devised and has been written solely for entertainment, yours and my own. Neither its characters nor its incidents have any basis outside the imagination.

One favour is asked of those who have already granted so many—my friends and colleagues of the British and American Press. Please do not reveal any detail of my plot in your criticisms.

GILBERT FRANKAU.

AIR MINISTRY—ROOM 28

CHAPTER ONE

I

THE most languid "lift," as the stubborn English still persist in calling that American invention the elevator, in the whole of Whitehall at last descended from the fourth to the ground floor of the Air Ministry. From it stepped two figures, one short and spare, the other vast and slightly reminiscent of a bulldog's.

"If I were Prime Minister," thought Albert Dowdy, who happened to be passing, "be sugared if I'd watch these blitzes from the roof."

The two figures disappeared, leaving only a fragrance of cigar smoke in their wake. The guns were roaring again.

"Nice quiet night, I don't think," ruminated Dowdy. "Sugar these Huns."

He continued along the dark corridor to his own messenger lobby; lit the gas ring; put the full kettle on it, and began to brew himself a dish of tea.

Yet another Hun was over. You could just hear the suck and puff of his engines. Why hadn't the Archies got on to the sod? Blast. Here came one of his eggs.

The whistle of the bomb shrilled to a scream. Automatically, Dowdy stepped out of his lobby, which was partly glass. That bomb burst fairly close. Another one screamed down. Gunfire crashed and crashed. He heard shell after shell bursting. Then, abruptly, he was stone deaf, flat on his back, staring up at a point of light which he recognised for the new A.R.P. ceiling bulb, put in that very evening.

He thought, queerly, "If that smashes, it'll be just too bad."

Albert Dowdy was still deaf; but the shaded light still shone. He managed to rise from the stone floor. Memories of another war told him that the acrid reek in his nostrils was high explosive.

Promptly he looked along the passage at the door of Room Twenty Eight.

That door, the only one of which he kept no key, had been closed. Now it bulged outwards from its hinges. If only the A.V.M.* had been working there. And damn it, he must have been . . .

"Best go see," thought Dowdy; and went.

The door was splintered, and jammed in its frame. Turning sideways, he put his left shoulder against the bulging wood and thrust with all his weight. Door and frame fell inwards. He stepped over them; stepped on broken glass; saw that the blackout blind had vanished from the window in the far wall.

Somewhere close, a big fire must be burning. No lights were on in this room; yet he could see everything in it clearly. Especially that thing at the desk.

"Copped his packet—the dirty tyke," thought Albert Dowdy. "Copped it good and proper." For it needed no medical knowledge to make certain that Air Vice-Marshal Marcus Ashdown, O.B.E., A.F.C., was dead.

The heavy body in the Air Force uniform had been blown upwards and forwards from the chair on which it had been sitting, to sprawl ungainly across the desk. The right arm hung inert, the ugly hand, stubby-fingered and square of nail, almost touching the carpet. The bent left arm was crushed between the chest and the top of the desk. Ashdown's bullet head—only the back of it, and the crop of reddish hair, visible—had not been hit. But a deep gash showed bloody at the nape above his collar; and what could be seen of his jacket and trousers looked as though some giant bird

* Air Vice-Marshal.

with steel talons had been ripping at the light blue cloth.

This spectacle, made all the more gruesome by the intermittent light of the flames, seemed to afford Dowdy some peculiar satisfaction. He was still eyeing it when shoes clacked along the corridor, and the helmeted youth in the civilian clothes joined him.

"What—," began the youth. Then his face changed, blanched, seemed to screw itself into wrinkles under the rim of the helmet; and his left hand clutched at the gasmask satchel he wore over his shoulder as though for support.

"You A.R.P.?" asked Dowdy.

"Y-e-s."

"Well, don't stand staring—or you may be sick. Cut along for a stretcher. There's one at the main door. Get the corporal of the guard and one of the duty officers."

"Who—who is he?"

"Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown. Leastways, he was."

The youth ran out. Gunfire was crashing again. Another bomb dropped fairly close. Dowdy stepped back into the corridor. Service boots clattered. Two sentries brought a green metal stretcher.

"In there," said Dowdy, jerking a thumb at the open doorway.

"Corporal said we were to wait. He's gone for the M.O." *

"Fat lot of good that'll be."

While they waited, more boots, more shoes sounded along the corridor. A tiny crowd began to gather. Dowdy kept them back.

"You people," he admonished, "had much better take shelter."

A girl's voice remonstrated, "But I'm first aid, Mr. Dowdy. I've got bandages, and some morphia."

"Too late for that I'm afraid, Miss King."

"Oh!"

The girl turned away. He lost sight of her. Two or three other girls, a "Waaf" among them, joined the tiny crowd.

* Medical Officer.

Corporal Huggins brushed his way through. A taller figure in officer's uniform with four rings on the sleeves of its jacket followed Huggins.

"It's Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown, sir," said Dowdy, who had recognised Group Captain Langfordson. "I'm afraid he's dead, sir."

Langfordson's features twitched. For several seconds he seemed unable to assimilate this item of intelligence.

"Dead?" he repeated.

"Killed, sir. By a bomb. It must have come in through the window."

"But that's nonsense. If a bomb had come in through any of the windows it would have blown the whole of this passage down."

"Anyway, he's dead, sir."

"Corporal, go and see. And you people"—Langfordson spoke to the crowd—"at least any of you who aren't on duty up here, cut along back to the sub-ground."

The crowd dwindled away, leaving only the two aircraftmen with the stretcher, the Waaf, and the girl with the first-aid box whom Dowdy had addressed as Miss King.

Corporal Huggins reappeared through the doorway of Room Twenty Eight. He reported in a low voice to Langfordson, whose long face—Dowdy noticed—twitched again as he told the two girls:

"You'd better be off to the sub-ground, too."

The Waaf said, "I'm the air vice-marshal's driver, sir. Shall I be wanted again?"

"I don't know. It doesn't look like it. Perhaps you'd better stand by somewhere or other."

"Very good, sir."

The girl with the first-aid box was already away.

"Shall we get him out now, sir?" asked the corporal.

"No. We'd better wait for the doctor."

"There's no M.O. on duty tonight, sir. Only an orderly."

"Damn. Oh well, I'll have to go and see for myself, I suppose."

But Langfordson, with the guns going once more, hesitated, while down the corridor at the double came another officer, who halted, clicked heels, and swept his right hand up to his helmet in the full-arm salute, saying:

"Security officer on duty, sir. I've just been told I'm wanted."

"Good."

3

The newcomer, who was shorter than Langfordson but carried himself better, wore wings and, in contrast to his superior, a double row of medal ribbons on his left breast. The rings on his sleeves and the brass V.R. at either lapel proclaimed him a squadron leader of the R.A.F. Volunteer Reserve. Yet somehow or other he managed to look more the horseman than the airman—and Albert Dowdy, who had an eye for such things, noticed that, contrary to present-day regulations, he carried his automatic pistol in its blue webbing holster at his right hip.

"What's your name?" asked Langfordson.

"Wordsworth, sir."

"Not the poet William?"

"I'm afraid I am called William, sir. Though family legend has it that I registered my original protest from the font."

Langfordson's slightly anaemic lips attempted a smile; Wordsworth's, red, full, and ever so slightly emotional under a closely clipped dark moustache, smiled without effort.

"Spot of trouble, sir?" he asked.

"I should just say there is. Not my pigeon, really. But I happened to be with Scrope-Tarleton when he heard about it. He told me I'd better come up. Bally nuisance, because I've got a long paper to write. That's why I stayed tonight. However, now that you've turned up——"

The sudden shrill of a telephone bell from Room Twenty

Eight interrupted Langfordson. Corporal Huggins asked.

"Shall I go and see who it is, sir?"

"No. I'll do it," answered Wordsworth; and, whipping a torch from his equipment, flashed it on; made for the doorway; stepped over the splintered wood, the smashed glass, and hesitated a fraction of a second at the sight which met his dark eyes.

"Nasty mess," thought Squadron Leader William Wordsworth. But he had seen nastier; and the black telephone, close to the dead man's head, still rang.

He scooped up the microphone, and managed to do this without touching head or body—habit meanwhile insisting, rather curiously, that he really ought to have used a handkerchief, so as not to blur any possible prints.

The operator said, "Six two three nine? I have a toll call for you. You have been a time answering," and put the call through without waiting to ascertain the correctness of the number, after the habit of Whitehall.

"I want to speak with Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown, please."

The voice was a woman's; its intonations low, deliberate, queerly attractive; its phraseology—speculated Wordsworth—ever so faintly un-English.

He speculated another fraction of a second before replying:

"I'm afraid you can't do that for the moment."

"He hasn't left, has he?"

"Well, no. He's still in the building."

"He asked me to call him at half past seven. But I couldn't get through till now."

More and more the voice attracted Wordsworth. Imagination pictured the woman at the other end of the line as young, and rather lovely.

"There's a bit of a raid on up here," he admitted—for the guns were at it once more. "I expect that's the reason."

"They are a nuisance, aren't they?"

"Nuisance!" thought Wordsworth, his eyes straying round the wrecked room, still lit by the fires outside. After

more thought, and phrasing the question with some care, he asked:

"Would you like to leave your name or a message?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter. It isn't very important."

"How about leaving your number?"

The wire went silent. Then the attractive voice said, "It's Tapworth, double three. I say, I believe I heard our sirens. Yes. I did, too. And I'm on duty tonight. So it won't be any good his calling me back. Goodbye, whoever you are."

"Au revoir, whoever *you* are," said Wordsworth. But the woman had already clicked off.

CHAPTER TWO

I

WHEN Wordsworth emerged from Room Twenty Eight, Langfordson was still standing in the corridor with Dowdy, Corporal Huggins and the two stretcher bearers.

"Well?" he asked.

"Only a private call, sir."

"And Bot—" Leslie Langfordson, who had nearly used the nickname by which the dead man had been known throughout the Air Force, checked himself just in time. "The air vice-marshal, I mean. I suppose there's nothing one can do."

"Except advise his next of kin, sir."

"That's D. of P.'s * job. At least I suppose it is. Look here, I simply must get on with my paper. It's wanted for tomorrow's conference. So will you take over—and let me have a report in the morning?"

"If you tell me your name and where to find you, sir?"

"Oh, sorry." Langfordson gave his name. "I'll be in Air Commodore Quaritch's office. He's just gone on a week's leave and I'm acting for him."

"Very good, sir."

The squadron leader saluted again. The group captain went off with long shambling strides. He disappeared round the angle of the corridor. "Just like that," ruminated Wordsworth. "Nice and casual. Passing the buck. Carry-on-sergeant-major sort of thing. Rum chap. Not the only one in this building. What happens next?"

His unspoken question was answered by a stick of four

* Director of Personnel.

bombs, which screamed down without any preliminary whistle, and burst almost simultaneously, nearly rocking him off his feet.

Followed a furious A.R.P. man, who declaimed, "There's a light showing from one of these windows. The police have just been over."

"I shouldn't wonder if it wasn't this one," said Dowdy, indicating the bulb above their heads, "with that door and the blackout curtain gone."

He stepped to the switch, and pushed it up, leaving them in almost total darkness, through which someone boomed, "What the hell are you chaps doing up here? Didn't you hear those bombs? Get out. Get down to the shelters."

"It's only Windy Willie, sir," explained Corporal Huggins. "One of our civil servants. He's always like that on blitz nights. We belong on this floor anyway. How about getting the A.V.M. out, sir?"

"We'll have to do something about the window first."

"We can't touch that," said Dowdy. "It's an Office of Works job. And they won't be on duty till tomorrow morning."

"That be damned for a tale," snapped Wordsworth. "Get me a couple of blankets, corporal. And a hammer. And some nails."

For less than two years ago he had been Chief of Police in that outpost of Empire which even the Colonial Office knows best by its nickname of "Cape Remittance"; and there the Chief of Police is subordinate only to the Resident, whose word is law.

2

All the lights in Room Twenty Eight were fuzed, and the fire outside dying down. It took the best part of forty minutes accordingly—including ten to find hammer, nails and blankets—before the window was blacked out again and Wordsworth could flash his torch.

To anyone with a moderate knowledge of gunnery, what had happened seemed at first sight tolerably obvious. Ashdown must have been killed by a faulty anti-aircraft shell, plunging in through the window and exploding on impact. Some of the splinters had made those wounds on his body; others had embedded themselves in the walls and the ceiling, and holed that green metal cupboard, that filing cabinet. So one might just as well get the body away. Only question—where to?

It struck Wordsworth, while he stood considering this question, as a little peculiar that no senior officer except Langfordson should have displayed the slightest interest in the death of an air vice-marshal. But then the Air Ministry—he had been realising ever since he was posted to it—was a very peculiar place.

“Get him on the stretcher anyway, corporal,” he ordered finally. “And put it down in the corridor for the moment.”

“Very good, sir.”

As the sentries lifted the body, a piece of white paper fluttered down from the desk. This, Wordsworth picked up; his torch revealing it to be an unfinished letter, ink-splashed but still decipherable.

“Naughty one,” he managed to read, “here’s a little something to go on with. Don’t spend it all on drink. I’ll be at the Silver Cellar Friday night, and we’ll skate home after the all clear as per usual. Let’s hope . . .”

Thoughtful, Wordsworth folded the unfinished letter and put it away in his notecase. “*De mortuis nil nisi bunkum.*” Maybe Ashdown was married. He left the room and put that question to Dowdy, who still lingered outside.

The corridor light was on again by then, and the messenger standing directly under it. A stubborn sort of face, the fellow had, clean-shaved, the colour of parchment, with thin lips and watery hazel eyes, bloodshot under wrinkled lids. The eyes were a little too small for the big head, bald except for a fringe of almost white hair.

Dowdy opened his mouth to show pointed yellow teeth.

"Yes," he said. "The A.V.M. was a married man.

"His wife was here yesterday," he volunteered, adding:

"It's an hour past my time for being on duty. I'll be off home now."

"All clear hasn't gone yet, Bert," Huggins reminded him.

"It will soon. There haven't been any guns for the last half hour and more."

The messenger took down and shrugged on the greatcoat which hung in his lobby; and went off. Wordsworth noted the length of the arms, the overbroad shoulders and the slightly sailorish gait—and made the further mental note, "Bad-tempered old devil."

Then, as he looked down at the blanketed shape on the stretcher in the corridor, the habit of many years once more asserted itself. Mrs. Ashdown ought to be informed of her husband's death at once.

Giving Huggins the orders—this also according to habit—that a sentry must remain on duty and that nobody must be allowed to enter the room, he made for the bowels of the building, known as the subground.

Descending, he was haunted by an elusive memory, that suddenly materialised into a perfect picture of Ashdown, nearly a quarter of a century younger, in the khaki tunic of the old Flying Corps.

"Just out from England, eh?" Ashdown was barking at him. "How many hours solo have you done? Half a dozen, I suppose. Don't expect you'll last long."

A four-letter man if ever there was one. The squadron had nicknamed him "Bottom Upwards." How they'd damned his eyes in the mess hut whenever he slipped off to Bailleul.

Memory vanished as Wordsworth made his way deeper and deeper underground and through the square archway, rather like that of a strong room, whose heavy metal door was guarded by a sentry. Here, one might have been below waterline aboard a warship.

It took the best part of ten minutes, and the descent of a

steel ladder, to discover the man he wanted, who said, after referring to a typed paper, "Here we are. He lives at Curzon Mansions and his telephone number is Mayfair five four nine four."

Reclimbing the stairs, Wordsworth encountered an old friend, Moxom, just coming off duty, who took him by the arm.

"I understand we've had a casualty," whispered Moxom. "Bottom Upwards. Another defeat for the Luftwaffe."

Popular bloke, the deceased!

Wordsworth's own room in the sub-ground was a mere cubicle. He could hear the teleprinters clicking as he sat down on his bed, picked up the black telephone instrument—the other telephone, green in colour and alleged to be more secret, only communicated with Service departments—and asked for Ashdown's number.

The bell at the other end of the wire rang and rang. Just as he had given up hope, a male voice, deep and maybe a little out of breath, answered, "Mayfair five four nine four. Who are you and what do you want?"

"This is the Air Ministry. I want to speak to Mrs. Ashdown, please."

"Hang on a minute."

Complete silence ensued. The speaker—it seemed to Wordsworth—must have his hand over the transmitter. After nearly a minute the deep voice went on:

"George Ramsay here. Who am I speaking to?"

And since Sir George Ramsay, though a civilian, ranked as one of the assistant chiefs of the Air Staff, Wordsworth, moderating his tone, seized the favourable opportunity.

He gave his number and the designation of his department first, to continue:

"I'm afraid I've very bad news for Mrs. Ashdown, Sir George. About a couple of hours ago an Archie shell burst in one of the ground floor rooms, and her husband——"

George Ramsay seemed very quick, almost too quick, on the uptake.

"Did it kill him outright?" he interrupted.

"I'm afraid it did."

"And you'd like me to—break the news?"

"If you wouldn't mind, Sir George."

A much longer silence ensued. Finally George Ramsay said, "Mrs. Ashdown would like to see you. The all clear's just going. I'll bring her along in about half an hour. You'd better wait for us in my room, number twenty—sorry—forty two G. That's on the ground floor of course."

And he hung up before Wordsworth had time to say, "All right."

3

Sir George Ramsay's room, unlocked by a messenger, was large, square, and carpeted from skirting board to skirting board. Mysterious graphs covered most of the wall space. In one corner stood a metal cylinder, six feet high, with a conical head. On a table in another corner Wordsworth perceived some empty shellcases and a collection of fuzes.

He told the messenger to leave him, lit a cigarette, and seated himself in the padded chair at Sir George's big desk, bare except for a pewter inkstand with several quill pens stuck in its holes, and one green metal tray marked "Out" which was quite empty. His watch showed him that it was exactly twenty eight minutes since his talk with Ramsay.

But twenty more minutes went by before the couple entered the room.

Surprisingly, both wore peacetime evening clothes—the woman a black frock with gold ornaments and a short fur of white ermine; the man, who carried a soft black hat in his left hand and a silk-lined overcoat slung over his right arm, a doublebreasted dinner jacket and a stiff shirt with a high wing collar.

The man, Wordsworth had seen once previously—though without bothering to ascertain his identity. And once, in Sir George Ramsay's case, was enough. Nobody could forget that scar which ran from the right of the two high cheek

bones to the edge of the cleft chin, that broad penthouse of a forehead, that thatch of gray-gold hair, those thin lips, or that Grecian nose, or those big, almost elephantine ears.

"Sorry if we've kept you waiting," said Sir George Ramsay, stooping from his great height to hold out a long dry capable hand. "But Mrs. Ashdown, naturally enough, was rather distressed."

Mrs. Ashdown also offered a hand, slim, white, soft and perfectly manicured, yet with an unexpectedly strong grip, saying, "I'd like to know exactly what happened, please," in what appeared to Wordsworth a carefully studied, faintly artificial voice.

All three were still on their feet.

Sir George asked, "Won't you sit down, Millicent? You've been working all day, you know."

"And dancing afterwards. Thanks."

He drew up a chair. She sat gracefully. Wordsworth noticed the distinctive perfume she used, the white streak (natural?) in her sleek blue-black perfectly dressed hair, the plucked lines of the eyebrows, the nose, which was slightly Oriental, the full scarlet (not so natural?) lips, the two dimples in the matt white cheeks.

"Go on," she said, eyeing him.

Her eyes were large, and even darker than his own. None of the distress alleged by Ramsay showed in her demeanour. Queerly, Wordsworth summed her up in one line of remembered poetry, "tall and sly and curling and compliant." Maybe too compliant. Why had she been dancing with George Ramsay? Why had it taken them a whole hour to come from Curzon Street to Whitehall?

He told her what he knew. She heard him out, making no comment until he had finished. Then she turned to her companion, asking, with a slight shiver:

"Do I have to look at the—the body, George?"

"Of course not."

"And the funeral. He'll be buried with military honours, I suppose?"

"You can leave all that to me, Millicent."

"Very well. Only—I don't want him home, George."

She rose to go; remembered to say, "Thank you for all you've done, squadron leader—you are that, aren't you?" and walked to the door.

Ramsay accompanied her; and turned back.

"Just wait a moment, will you, Wordsworth?"

"All right, Sir George."

From outside the door came first a whisper, then the woman's, "Perhaps that would be best. I've got my pass. I'll send the car back for you."

4

Ten minutes afterwards Wordsworth and George Ramsay stood in Room Twenty Eight.

"Queer," George Ramsay was saying, as he flashed a torch here, there and everywhere. "The fuze ought to be somewhere about. Bring it along to me if you find it, please."

And he added, before they left, "This room used to be mine. So it might just as well have been me. Do you happen to believe in God, Wordsworth?"

The meaning was so obvious that no answer seemed necessary. And anyway Ashdown had been killed by enemy action. A fate—Wordsworth remembered—which Ashdown had not courted with overmuch alacrity in the previous war.

CHAPTER THREE

I

"MORNING, Guy."

"Hullo, W.W. What the dooce are you doing here? It's your day off."

"Then you haven't heard what happened last night?"

"No. Anything interesting?"

The black telephone rang while Flight Lieutenant Guy Conington, who shared the responsibilities of the Security sub-section known as Air Intelligence 27b, was still speaking.

"A.I. twenty-seven b here. Conington."

The excited voice at the other end crackled out several sentences.

"Just hang on a moment," drawled Conington; and, cupping a hand over the transmitter:

"It's somebody from the Office of Twerps. He's trying to get into Room Twenty Eight on the ground floor. Apparently you've posted a sentry there, and the sentry won't let him in. He seems rather livid about it."

"Ask him to come up here."

Conington uncupped his hand from the transmitter and gave the message. The far voice crackled again.

"He says, in effect, that His Majesty's Office of Works doesn't take any blue-pencilled orders from any boy in blue. And that he'll see you in the sub-sub-ground before he comes up."

"Let me talk to him, Guy."

After some argument, smooth words prevailed, and Wordsworth replaced the instrument in its cradle.

"The chap only wanted handling," he said. "All these civil servants are a bit tetchy."

"Tetchy. You know what I think of the blighters."

Conington, formerly of Fleet Street, where he had conducted a slightly malicious gossip page, smoothed his straw-blond hair with a characteristic gesture and extracted a thin gold cigarette case from the left top pocket of an exquisitely tailored jacket, devoid of either wings or medals.

"And now for the story, W.W. Anything in it for the old rag, by the way?"

"Lots. If you want to be slung out of the R.A.F. on your ear."

Wordsworth hung his tin hat and gasmask on a hook in the door; peeled off his heavy coat, sliding his fore-and-aft cap into one of the capacious pockets, and hung that up on a hanger. As usual after a night on duty he had shaved, bathed and breakfasted at his flat. Not so usually, he had been haunted—especially over breakfast—by the memory of a young woman's voice. Where might Tapworth be? Did the owner of that voice ever come to town?

"Cigarette?" asked Conington.

"Thanks. We had a casualty last night. Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown."

"Acting air-vice only," corrected Conington, after ascertaining the rest. "Accent on the vice. He married the Palmer girl. Just before Munich, that must have been. Alleged virgin. Pots of money. Café society, Mayfair dashed with Leicestershire, Switzerland and Palm Beach. She used to run about with—— Let me see, who *was* it? Why, hallo, Boulte?"

The newcomer wore khaki, a major's crown, the ribbon of the Distinguished Service Order, the three previous-war ribbons, and a service cap with the badge of the Gunners at the jauntiest angle on his perfectly round head. His ears lay flat to his skull. His pale brown moustache, despite the closeness of the clipping, seemed to bristle. The fierce eyes were palest blue, the right one monocled. Just under medium

height, he moved across the room—thought Wordsworth—like a jungle cat before it springs.

"You're Wordsworth, I gather," began Anthony Boulte. "I came in to make my number. How de do?"

He shook hands without removing the cane from under his arm. The door opened again. A tallish man in a homespun suit entered, and announced himself as, "Blinkhorn. Office of Works. About Room Twenty Eight, squadron leader. My men have got to get in, you know."

Boulte interrupted, "So have I. That's what I really came about."

"Why?" asked Wordsworth.

"Because I'm Flak, otherwise anti-aircraft. And it was an anti-aircraft shell that killed Ashdown."

"How did you happen to know that?"

The ex-chief of police at Cape Remittance had put the question automatically. Boulte grinned, but made no direct reply.

"Let's all go down the Strand and have a banana," he went on. "Mind if I use your phone?"

Without waiting for permission, he scooped up the green instrument, was put through to a number, and said, "You know where I am, Frank. Come along over."

"Cheek," thought Wordsworth. But possibly Boulte was within his rights.

2

Wordsworth had already met Squadron Leader Frank Izod—and summed him up as, "one of those really tough eggs who don't look it." For nobody could have looked less the conventional tough egg than this tall, slim, slightly actorish man, with the smooth, oval, ivory-complexioned face, the dark blue eyes and the sleek casque of jetblack hair, worn without a parting and only just beginning to go gray in the early fifties.

Izod's voice and manners, too, were a smooth contradiction to Boulte's.

"If you don't mind, Wordsworth," he said, "I think we really ought to have a look at the room. We're liaison with the War Office, you see—and they're certain to be interested."

"All right. You can come along. Hold the fort, will you, Guy? The telephone in Twenty Eight should still be working. Black line—six two three nine. Let me know if I'm wanted."

"Okay, W.W. I suppose I can't ring up the old rag and tell 'em to be getting on with the obituary."

"You certainly can't."

As they went side by side down the stone stairs, Wordsworth found himself asking Blinkhorn, "By the way, do you happen to know where a place called Tapworth is?"

But it was Izod, following with Boulte, who answered, "Tapworth? I can tell you. It's forty-two miles out of London on the Great North Road. I've got a house in Little Tapworth, that's the next village. Why do you want to know?"

"Because—" began Wordsworth; and stopped there.

They approached Room Twenty Eight.

The sentry outside stiffened to attention. Wordsworth asked him how long he had been on duty.

"Since eight o'clock, sir."

"Has anyone tried to get in?"

"Yes, sir. This gentleman." He indicated Blinkhorn. "And the squadron leader." He indicated Izod, who said nonchalantly:

"The messenger on the front door told me we'd had a shell through the window. So I thought I'd take a look-see."

So Izod, presumably, had told Boulte.

The four of them—Wordsworth leading—entered the room.

"We'll have to get those blankets away from the window," said Blinkhorn.

Boulte slid a knife which would have gladdened any Boy Scout's heart from a pocket in his cord breeches, and set to work on the lower nails.

"I shall want a chair for the top ones, Frank."

"Right."

"Those two," thought Wordsworth, struck by the unison of their movements as they took down and carefully folded the blankets, "seem to be pretty close mates."

Meanwhile Blinkhorn was grumbling, "The ceiling will have to be plastered. We shall need a new window frame, and a new door. The carpet's pretty badly stained, too. It'll need cleaning."

He stooped to pick up an overturned inkpot. Habit made Wordsworth say, "Please don't touch that. I don't want anything moved for the moment."

"But we can't leave the place in this state. We're so frightfully short of accommodation. And look at that cupboard. Look at that filing cabinet."

"Don't touch them either. Please!"

Outside, a high-pitched almost girlish voice demanded admittance, which the sentry refused.

"But I'm his P.A.,* I tell you. I've simply got to go in."

"I'm sorry, sir. But those are my orders."

Wordsworth, stepping to the doorway, saw a face almost as girlish as the voice and a round R.A.F. service cap, from under whose peak blinked a pair of scary eyes.

"What's your name?" he asked.

Ashdown's personal assistant saluted.

"Messiter, sir. I've been on leave. I only got back just now. What's been happening?"

Purposefully brutal, Wordsworth told him, "The A.V.M. was killed last night."

"Marcus? Oh, my God! Who—what did it?"

The boy tottered on his feet. "Going to faint?" thought Wordsworth, and gripped Messiter by an arm which seemed devoid of muscle.

"A shell. Pull yourself together, lad."

"I—I'll be all right in a moment, sir. I'll—I'll have a cigarette, I think."

* Personal Assistant.

He lit up with trembling fingers, and followed Wordsworth back into the room. This time Izod was stooping to the carpet. He picked something up, made as though to put it in one of his pockets.

"What have you got there?" asked Wordsworth.

"The fuze, I imagine. M.I. ten will want to see that, and we ought to send them some of these fragments."

"M.I. ten. Who do they happen to be?"

"War Office. Technical." Boulte answered. "They'll tell us what calibre shell it was. Not that there's much doubt. Three point seven obviously. I don't suppose you know anything about gunnery."

"Only what they taught me at the Shop,"* snapped Wordsworth, who had been a regular officer of the Royal Regiment before his transfer to the Flying Corps, "and what I learned in L Battery. Let me have that fuze, please."

Izod handed over the fuze, which was thinner, much lighter and much longer than the brass ones of the previous war.

"We use clockwork nowadays," volunteered Izod. "I didn't know you were one of us, Wordsworth. I was a kind of a gunner in the last show. Trench mortars. Only a temporary gentleman, of course."

"About this room—" interrupted Blinkhorn; but the black telephone rang before he could finish his sentence, and when Messiter would have answered it, Wordsworth pulled him back.

"I want to speak with Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown, please."

The voice was the voice of the previous night, the one that had haunted Wordsworth all through breakfast. Conscientious of a peculiar excitement, he answered without thought:

"You rang up yesterday evening."

"I did. Who are you?"

"My name's Wordsworth. You're talking from London this time."

"How do you know?"

* Royal Military Academy, Woolwich.

"I don't. I'm just guessing."

"Well, you're quite right. And now, can I speak with Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown?"

Thinking for a second, Wordsworth saw, out of the corner of one eye, that Izod had approached the desk. He conceived the idea that Izod, though the ivory oval of his face betrayed no interest, was listening intently.

"I'm afraid," he went on slowly, "that you still can't do that. Would you very much object to giving me your name?"

"You sound quite anxious to find out, Mr.—Mr.—did you say Wordsworth?"

"That's it. And *you're* quite right this time. Not only do I want to know who you are, but I particularly want to make your acquaintance."

"How very mysterious. Well, as you insist, my name's Johnson."

"Miss or Mrs.?"

A slight hesitation preceded the, "Miss. I work for Helen Stannard, if you know who she is."

"I've seen the name up. Bond Street, isn't it?"

"Yes. Fifty-seven a."

"And what time do you come off duty?"

"You sound rather a fast worker, Mr. Wordsworth."

"That isn't answering my question."

"Well—we're supposed to be away by half past three nowadays."

"I'll be there," said Wordsworth; and hung up to hear yet another voice questioning the sentry:

"Is Major Boulte in there? One of the messengers told me he might be. Tell him Captain Prisworthy would like to see him, please."

Boulte called, "Hallo, Prisworthy. Just the very man we're looking for. Come on in."

And, "The more I know of Boulte," thought Wordsworth, "the more I'd like to kick his backside."

3

The pugfaced Prisworthy, of Military Intelligence ten, in khaki void of medals or decorations, saluted the room. Izod made the introduction. Blinkhorn, with a controlled, "I've got heaps of other things to see to this morning, squadron leader. So you'll have to excuse me. Let me know the moment you're through, please," and made himself scarce.

"We heard about this," said Prisworthy. "So I thought I'd better come along. Is it all right if I have a dekkio round?"

Wordsworth said, "You might take a dekkio at this fuze first."

The expert examined the fuze for some time, weighing it in a freckled hand, smelling it, and taking it to the window. All the while, Izod—or so it seemed—watched him too intently.

"Usual type, isn't it?" suggested Izod.

Prisworthy burked the question by asking Wordsworth, "Would you mind if I took this back to the War House with me?"

"Not if you let me have it back again."

"Oh, that'll be all right."

Next, Prisworthy examined what was left of the window.

"Was there some sort of a locker here?" he asked.

"Yes." Messiter answered. "A wooden one with two little doors. We never used it, though."

Wordsworth joined Prisworthy. The locker, from what remained of it, must have been about three feet in depth, partly hollowed from the wall.

"It made a kind of window seat," volunteered Messiter. "The shell must have landed plumb on top of it."

"Looks as though you're right," interpolated Boulte.

"What I can't understand—" began Prisworthy; and checked. He continued his examination; handled one of the pieces of plaster which had fallen from the ceiling; and fi-

nally pounced on a fragment of shell about half the size of a cricket ball.

"Can I have that cupboard open?" he asked next.

Wordsworth, who had emptied Ashdown's pockets after his interviews with Mrs. Ashdown and George Ramsay, produced a bunch of keys. Inside the metal cupboard lay a similar fragment. Prisworthy said:

"If we collected the lot, we might be able to reconstruct the shell. That could be rather interesting."

"Won't it be rather a job?" asked Izod.

"Don't forget to have the corpse dissected, otherwise you may miss some of the bits," sneered Boulte.

Messiter winced. Prisworthy took no notice. Wordsworth, not without difficulty, relocked the cupboard.

"I think," he said to Prisworthy, "that your idea is pretty sound. Only—who's to do the collecting?"

"I could arrange for that, if you'd let me use your telephone"; and presently Prisworthy was saying, "Ministry of Supply? Hallo, is that Major Negresco? Good morning, sir. I'm at the Air Ministry . . ."

Halfway through the conversation Boulte said, "Well, it's no good us mucking about here any longer, Frank"; and the pair of them left the room.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

"WELL?" asked Guy Conington, looking up from the *Times* crossword puzzle, to which he was an addict, some two hours later. "Had a busy morning, W.W.?"

"Up to a point."

Their desks stood back to back. Wordsworth sat down.

"That bloke Blinkhorn," he went on, "is nobody's fool, though a little slow in the uptake. We're keeping the sentry on the door until we've done a spot more investigation, George Ramsay or no George Ramsay."

"What's he got to do with it?"

"I wouldn't know that—yet. All I know is that he's very anxious to have Room Twenty Eight back. It used to be his up to about a week ago. His Miss King——"

"Who's she?"

"His secretary, I imagine."

"Does she take down——" began Conington.

"I wouldn't know that either. I haven't met the lady yet. But she wasted quite a lot of Blinkhorn's time on the telephone, trying to persuade him to start his repairs immediately. And when he wouldn't do anything she got on to Langfordson about it. I happened to be with him at the time. To make my report as per orders. By the way, do you happen to know anything about Langfordson?"

"Leslie Longshanks?" Conington ruminated. "Yes. A little. I started in his section. But we didn't take much of a fancy to each other. He's one of these 'procedure' merchants. I expect he wanted a minute in triplicate through Daddy Dorland."

"Not he. All he wanted was to be left Garbo." And Wordsworth, who had a talent for mimicry, repeated Langfordson's, "We're all rather invasion-conscious this morning. So don't worry me, there's a good chap."

"And so you didn't?"

"No. But I may have to. Is Boulte a friend of yours, Guy?"

"No. But I can't help liking the fellow. He's so very much the man of war. And he won't be sugared about by anybody. Did you ever hear about his row with Daddy?"

Conington elaborated; but the tale did not appeal.

"Daddy's rather a gallant old boy," said Wordsworth. "Even if he does change his mind every twenty-four hours. And he's done us pretty well."

"That's all part of the game," drawled Conington. "Leslie Longshanks plays it the same way. They all do. The more sub-sections you can start, the more efficient you're supposed to be. Take ourselves. What are our terms of reference? That one blessed word, 'Liaison.' If ever the British Empire produces a Messalina, she'll find enough liaison officers in this one Ministry to keep even her happy. And that reminds me, I've got a lunch date. I'll be back at two-thirty, or thereabouts. Hallo. Heil Goering. There's an alert."

Conington capped himself, gloved himself, and went out. Five minutes later Wordsworth—busy with notebook and pencil—heard first guns, then a distant bomb drop, and finally the spotter's alarm bell in the corridor outside.

This farce had begun to annoy him. Nevertheless—as they happened to fit in with his plans—he obeyed orders, locking the filing cabinet, taking his gasmask and "proceeding to the sub-ground."

On his way he encountered various officers, most of them carrying green metal trays full of files and papers. Among these were Langfordson, who did not even look at him, and Boulte, capped and caned for the street.

"How about a spot of lunch at the Eccentric Club?" asked Boulte.

"Thanks. But I'm afraid I can't manage it."

"Some other time then?"

"Yes. I'd like to." Which was not a precise truth.

"Why the invitation?" speculated Wordsworth. "I really must find out more about Anthony Boulte."

2

Wordsworth lunched frugally in the sub-ground canteen which had been opened simultaneously with the dormitories for typists and other minimum-wage civil servants, despite the protests of a non-belligerent air commodore, "But surely they've all got their clubs." The alert was still on, and the upper floors almost deserted, when he re-entered Room Twenty Eight, and re-examined it in thoughtful solitude for nearly half an hour.

"None of my damn business, even if I'm right," he caught himself thinking; but habit proved too strong; and presently he unlocked the metal cupboard, the filing cabinet, and the one locked drawer of the desk.

Ashdown's service papers were few, and in the most meticulous order. One, headed, "Most Secret. Plan M.A.," Wordsworth memorised, marvelling at its brutality. The private papers included three letters of amatory import in an uneducated handwriting signed, "Yours ever so, F.," and a cheque book with only three cheques unused.

Nearly all the counterfoils in this book were for the similar amounts, ten pounds, drawn to bearer; but the same cabalistic symbol distinguished so many of them that Wordsworth copied it in his notebook; and showed it to Conington, without disclosing its origin, when that straw-blond journalist returned from lunch.

"Definitely phallic, if you ask me," drawled Conington. "Though it might just be the arms of the Isle of Man."

"Or an embryo swastika?"

"By jove, I hadn't thought of that, W.W. It's upside down though, isn't it?"

They were still discussing this when the green telephone rang, and Conington said, "It's a bloke named Silcox. He alleges that he's p.a. to Sir George Ramsay. And he wants to come up."

Silcox materialised almost immediately—a thick-set civilian in his middle forties with bad teeth and a worn complexion, whose left leg was obviously artificial.

"My master," he began, "sends his bloodstained compliments, and would like to know whether you've found that flaming fuze."

"Not yet," lied Wordsworth; and Conington's pale eyes stared.

Silcox hobbled out.

"From the way you're going on—" began Conington; but that time a messenger interrupted, laying two pink slips in front of Wordsworth, and announcing:

"They say that Major Negresco told them to report to you. Shall I bring them in here, sir?"

"No. I'll come out"; and Wordsworth left the room, not reappearing till ten minutes past three, when he said, "I've got to be off now. See you tomorrow morning."

He took soap and towel from his desk, and ran off to the nearby washroom. Returning, he brushed dark hair with a slight trace of natural wave at the mirror—"borrowed" from Conington's mother—which hung by the window.

Furthermore, and in addition to examining the set of his tie, he brushed his heavy eyebrows and his moustache, before he buckled on his pistol and shrugged himself into his coat.

"Why the gun?" drawled Conington. "Are yours, perhaps, the legendary intentions—seduction if in any way possible, rape only if absolutely necessary?"

"You've got a mind like a sewer, Guy," snapped Wordsworth, surprised at his own bad temper.

"I was a pure young soul, at least for Fleet Street, until you showed me round Cape Remittance, W.W."

For it was there, on one of Conington's copy-hunting trips, that they had originally met.

3

Just outside the main door of the Air Ministry Wordsworth was buttonholed by Messiter, who wore no overcoat and a crape band on one sleeve of his jacket.

"It's for Marcus," he explained. "He was my guardian, you see. I've just been having lunch with Millicent. The poor darling's simply heartbroken. And what's going to happen to me, I simply can't imagine."

"What about a nice Spitfire?" asked Wordsworth, and escaped to his baby car, Minnie Mouse, which he always parked in the courtyard of the Foreign Office, just across King Charles Street.

He thought, as he drove out under the archway into Downing Street, "Is this investigation, or just inclination?" For that the Miss Johnson of the attractive voice could be identical with the "Naughty One" of Ashdown's letter—who was presumably "yours ever so, F."—seemed quite impossible to his excited mind.

One was—Wordsworth realised as he made Bond Street—in a wild, almost feverish state of excitement. So the sooner one took a pull at one's imagination the better. Young women were the devil anyway, even when angelic enough for particular occasions—and Miss Johnson, for all one knew about her, might be a spotty girl with a squint.

He parked outside fifty-seven a; opened up Minnie Mouse's exiguous engine, and pocketed her distributor arm—a precautionary measure introduced during the July invasion scare. One door of glass and chromium led up a flight of carpeted stairs to another, marked, "Helen Stannard. Beauty Culture." Through this second door came Ashdown's widow, in a dark red frock with a dark red hat scarcely larger than the round airtight tins in which cigarettes are exported to Cape Remittance, on the very top of her head.

Wordsworth saluted. Millicent Ashdown held out a gloved hand.

"How funny," she smiled. "I've just been hearing a lot about you from Adrian Messiter. I gathered you'd been rather brutal to the poor little chap. He was all of a flutter. The funeral's the day after tomorrow. I simply loathe funerals. They're even worse than weddings. I suppose I oughtn't to ask what brings you here—it's too obvious. Well—good hunting!"

She passed on down the stairs. Wordsworth opened the door. A receptionist who might have been straight Hollywood looked up from a magazine to ask:

"Are you the gentleman from the Air Ministry Gale Johnson is expecting? Because if you are, she says will you please wait in here, and she won't be more than a few minutes."

So Miss Johnson's christian name, like her voice, was un-English—Gale.

The small green and gold waiting room into which the aphrodisiacal receptionist ushered him was unoccupied, and its temperature in the seventies. He took off his cap and greatcoat; laid them on a little sofa. Once again he was conscious of that feverish excitement and of the need to control his imagination.

Then the green and gold door opened, and the girl came through.

She closed it and faced him. Her eyes were a golden brown; her complexion, faintly pink and truly white, flawless. Real auburn hair crowned a forehead just a trifle too broad, a face almost heart-shaped. This much he took in before generous lips opened to ask:

"Are you Mr. Wordsworth?"

"I am."

He held out a hand. She hesitated before taking it. Her hand was small, but not too small, very white, very smooth and a trifle plump. She wore heather-mixture country clothes and no jewelry. His spare figure overtopped hers by some three inches.

"Won't you sit down?" she went on.

"If I'm not keeping you."

"No. I'm lucky tonight. Someone's promised to drive me home."

He cleared his coat from the little sofa. They sat down—both a trifle awkwardly. He noticed that her figure, like her hands, was just a wee bit plump; and that she did not use scent.

"Are you an American, Miss Johnson?"

"Yes. But I've been over here more than seven years. What did you come to see me about?"

Her eyes were direct, yet he sensed apprehension behind them. For the flash of a second habit held him. Was it ever advisable to volunteer information?

After a pause, he said, speaking slowly, "I came to see you about Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown."

She said nothing. Her eyes seemed to stare. Her apprehension grew obvious. Habit gripped him again. Yet, simultaneously, he was conscious of a desire to touch her, to lay a hand on her shoulder. A sweet girl. And only a girl. Twenty-three, maybe. Certainly not more than twenty-five. Difficult to be sure, though. This wasn't Cape Remittance. Girls ripened young there. And no wonder.

The thread of speculation snapped. This girl was still staring at him. One couldn't play the police chief with her. Not possibly.

"I'm afraid"—he did touch her then, very gently, very gingerly, on the left shoulder—"that if you and he were friends, I've rather bad news for you. He was killed last night, just before you telephoned."

"How?" The single monosyllable had been barely breathed. Motionless except for the slightest flutter of dark eyelashes, she continued to stare at him. Yet now, queerly, it seemed as though all apprehension had left her.

"By an anti-aircraft shell. It came in at the window. Death was quite instantaneous. He didn't suffer."

"He made me suffer plenty," said Gale Johnson—and stopped.

The words, more thoughtful than callous, jerked Wordsworth's hand from her shoulder.

"I'm sorry about that," he managed to say.

"I don't want pity. Nobody was to blame but myself. There never is anybody to blame but oneself. Besides, I'm glad he's dead. Glad! Does that shock you?"

"Coming from you, it does."

He had not intended to say that. He didn't really mean that. Or did he? Why had he let himself in for this scene anyway? Young women *were* the devil. That was why he'd never married.

She repeated his own words, "I'm sorry about that"; and rose.

Rising himself, facing her again, Wordsworth was aware of excitement returning, and that this excitement was all the more feverish because faintly mutual. Her eyes no longer stared. They glinted at him. She put one hand to her mouth, took it away again.

"I don't know why," she began, "but I'd hate you to think too badly of me. I've reason enough for being glad. Ever since Marcus married that . . . that woman who was here just now he's tried everything to make me perjure myself."

"Perjure yourself?"

"I don't know if that's the right word. I don't know anything about law. But what else would it have been if I'd signed a paper to say that my, that our son, wasn't his?"

She stopped again, for many seconds, her breast heaving a little, but her hands steady at her sides.

"Michael's five," she went on at last. "And such a darling. I've always dreaded having to tell him the truth—that his father and I never married. Have I shocked you again?"

Wordsworth smiled; and the smile—it seemed to Gale—transformed a face which had been just a little too stern in repose.

"I'm not quite as British as that," he said with surprising

intuition; and, holding out his hand again, "As you're being driven back to Tapworth I mustn't keep you any longer or you won't be out of London before blackout time."

The excitement of which he was still fully conscious made him add, as their fingers met, "I could drive you down one of these nights if you don't mind a very tiny car."

Her golden brown eyes considered him a moment. Then she said:

"And how about your getting back to London? It's over forty miles to Tapworth, and at least another two to Manor Cottage."

"Is that the name of your house?"

"Yes." She hesitated. "Of course, if you happened to be in our part of the world one Sunday—I'm nearly always home Sundays——"

"I could meet Michael," interrupted Wordsworth.

She smiled at him. He had the most violent impulse to kiss her. This, he managed to restrain; but his fingers, still holding hers, tightened, as he said:

"That's a bet, then. The first Sunday I'm free. I'll telephone you."

"Not here. I may be busy when you ring up. And it's always a little awkward."

"All right. I've got the other number."

Their fingers unclasped. He picked up his coat; put it on; buttoned it up; said, "Goodbye," and opened the door for her to precede him.

"You've forgotten to do up your belt," she said.

"Why—so I have."

Both laughed. He slid belt strap through buckle.

"That way," went on Gale. "I'm afraid our receptionist has gone. But you'll find both doors still unlocked."

Outside the street door, nose to nose with Minnie Mouse, stood another car—a black Rolls-Bentley. Out of it stepped another R.A.F. officer, who said, "Hallo, Wordsworth."

"Hallo, Izod."

So it was Frank Izod who had promised to drive her home—damn him.

"Why damn him?" thought Wordsworth. "I can't have fallen in love with her? Or can I? I always have taken my fancies a bit too quickly. Paid for 'em, too."

CHAPTER FIVE

I

CAPE REMITTANCE retires its officials very young, and is generous with pensions but grudging with leaves. The outbreak of the Second German War, accordingly, had left William Wordsworth, only just superannuated, better off for money than for friends at home. He realised this, almost poignantly—though he rarely indulged in selfpity—while he dined at a lonely table in his club.

The guns were at work as he drove back to his three-roomed service flat. They went on intermittently throughout the night. Unusually, they kept on waking him; and every time he woke he remembered Gale. Confound that young woman. If experience were any guide to sensation, she had got "right under his skin."

By seven he was wide awake. The all clear sounded while he made his first cup of tea. The servant who brought his breakfast said, "Rather a rough night, sir." Walking to the Air Ministry—Minnie Mouse was to be oiled and greased that Friday morning—he found St. James' Park closed for an unexploded bomb.

On principle, "because if you do it once, you may get your alleged superiors into the bad habit of expecting you to do it constantly," Guy Conington never arrived until a good half hour after the stipulated nine o'clock. So Wordsworth, unlocking their cupboard, riffled through the papers in the "In" tray, most of which seemed to him unnecessary, and all of which, with one exception, represented mere routine.

"Joined up to help win this war," he thought disgruntledly. "Drawing ten pounds a week pay, plus allowances, plus

my pension. And what am I doing?—a blasted clerk's job."

Then the green telephone rang; a female voice said, "Squadron Leader Wordsworth. One moment, please. Professor Artemus Atkinson would like a word with you," and disgruntledness disappeared.

The professor's loud voice sounded distinctly professorial, very deliberate and very much on guard.

"Major Negresco," it said, "has shown me a certain object which he obtained from a Captain Prisworthy at the War Office, and which, I am given to understand, Captain Prisworthy obtained from you. At eleven o'clock I propose holding a conference to consider that object, and I would appreciate it if you could attend."

The name of a building and the number of a room followed. Promising to attend the conference, Wordsworth looked over his shoulder and perceived Boulte. Sly devil, Boulte. How long had he been in the room? Must have come in like a cat. Rubber heels and toe-pieces, probably. How much could he have overheard?

"Morning, Wordsworth."

"Good morning, Boulte. Cigarette?"

"No thanks. Never use 'em. Snuff's my poison. Try a pinch?"

Wordsworth shook his head. Boulte drew a small silver box from one pocket; tapped it; snuffed delicately, and put it back again. This morning, from his Sam Browne belt, black with age, hung a full holster.

"Forty-five Webley," he went on, obviously noting the other's glance. "I don't care for automatics. Had one jam on me. Hence this."

He pulled up his right sleeve to display a scar; and went on, just a little—or so it seemed—too casually:

"You were talking to Arty Atkinson. I'd recognise that voice in an earthquake. What's the conference about? Fuzes? Because if so I ought to be in on it."

"Have you been invited?" Wordsworth's dark eyes clashed with the other's pale blue.

"No. But I easily can be. Arty and I have been buddies ever since the balloon went up. He's a wise old bird—but a bit too cautious for my liking."

"You don't approve of caution, I gather."

"*Das kommt darauf an.* Sorry. I'm so used to talking German with Frank that I'm getting to think in it. I should have said, 'That depends.' Do you speak Hun, by any chance? Probably, as you're not in the German section."

Guy Conington's entrance broke up the talk. Boulte—monocle gleaming—mock-saluted, and left them. Guy said:

"I've just looked in on Press Section. You might care to know that Ashdown's death is in the obituary column of this morning's *Times*."

"Does it say, 'By enemy action'?"

"No. Just 'died on active service.' That's one reason why I looked in on Press Section. They say the censors are on the job. Apparently they're afraid the public may think the Air Ministry's been hit. Damn good thing if it were blown to hell in my opinion. Did you see the note I left you about your old pal Blinkhorn?"

"Yes. Tell me something. How much do you really know about Boulte?"

"Very little. But I could easily find out more."

Conington, pernickety about his health, lit his first cigarette of the day. W.W.—he realised—was in no mood for gossip or for imparting information. But if there weren't a story—and a leviathan of a story—behind Ashdown's death, six months in a government office had blunted one's nose for news.

"It's Boulte's background I'm interested in," went on Wordsworth. "Is he married? Or does he keep? How much money has he got? That sort of thing. Dig up what you can—there's a good chap. And as quickly as you can."

"What about the office jobs? There's that report for Home Security."

"That can wait."

"And the minute to M.I. five."

"They might be able to tell you something about Boulte, if you took it over personally."

"Good idea, W.W. I'll try it on."

2

Arty Atkinson's conference had lasted the best part of an hour; and all through that hour Wordsworth had been disliking Boulte. The man was too clever by half—a cynical devil, with that monocle which never left his eye and that sneer which never left his lips. Moreover, he had no business in this room. For all one knew so far, he and Izod . . .

Thought checked. The professor was summing up. They were all agreed on one point—that this matter needed further and more expert investigations. He suggested that Major Negresco should take charge of the investigating. Did anyone object?

"I don't," said Prisworthy.

"And how about you, Wordsworth?"

"Not as long as Major Negresco confines his investigations to the purely technical aspect."

The professor's crab-apple face developed several new wrinkles. He covered his eyes, which were rather like a hawk's, with a dry hand; removed the hand; and blinked across the table.

"How do you feel about that, Negresco?"

"I feel that Wordsworth's right. All we're concerned with—as Ministry of Supply—is the shell. But of course I can't speak for the War Office."

"Nor can I," said Prisworthy. "Only for M.I. ten. D.A.A. and C.D. might be interested."

"And who might he be?" asked the professor.

"Director of Anti-Aircraft Artillery and Coast Defence," interpolated Boulte—just to show off, it seemed to Wordsworth.

The professor said, "If I had a little time to spare,

of initials to signify this, that and the other is the curse of all three services. Meanwhile, however"—and here he consulted a vast gold watch—"as I am due at another conference in exactly two minutes, I suggest that we all keep this matter under our hats until we have something more definite to go on."

"That suits me," said the pugfaced Prисworthy—and the conference broke up.

3

There was no escaping Boulte's invitation, "If you're going back to the Air Ministry, Wordsworth, hop in and I'll drive you there." But Boulte's road manners did nothing to decrease his passenger's dislike.

Boulte drove his big car—disreputable of appearance, but mechanically superperfect—as though it were a Hun tank trying to mow down French refugees. Blocked for a moment, he damned and blasted; and in that moment Wordsworth, who had an eye for such things, noted that their windscreen carried no licensing disc, only a large label marked "Air Ministry."

"What's the hurry?" he asked.

"I want my port," said Boulte.

He stopped at a public house, and, pressing Wordsworth to "have a quick 'un," led down to a Dive Bar, whose flamboyant barmaid greeted him with:

"Good morning, major. The usual?"

"Two of 'em," said Boulte.

They drank standing. After a conventional, "Well, here's fun," Boulte's manner changed completely.

"You don't like me," he began. "Very few people do. I've got an unfortunate way of expressing myself. But, unlike most people in Intelligence, I do know my job."

Wordsworth said nothing. Boulte put his glass down, and took a pinch of snuff.

"I could be a good deal of help to you," he went on, "if you'd let me. That's to say if you meant what you said to Negresco. We could handle the thing on our own in that case. All except the technical part, which seems fairly obvious."

"Have another?" asked Wordsworth, playing for time.

"I don't mind if I do. Let's squat, shall we?"

The barmaid refilled their glasses. They moved to one of the tile-topped tables, and sat down.

"Well," asked Boulte, "how does my idea appeal to you?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't. Not for the present anyway. You see——"

"I see a hell of a lot more than you imagine; and I know a hell of a lot more than you'll ever find out."

Momentarily, Boulte had reverted to his original savage self. His eyes glared. His moustache bristled. Once more he reminded Wordsworth of a jungle cat about to pounce. Then his manner changed again.

"Sorry," he went on. "You're quite right. It's none of my damn business how Ashdown died."

A shadow fell across the table; a voice, Izod's, said, "Hallo, Tony. I thought I might find you here. Vesey's just been on the phone. He's particularly anxious to talk to you personally—and he's leaving group in half an hour to go to one of his stations."

"Blast Vesey. All right. I'll come along."

The two went quickly out and up the narrow stairs. Wordsworth went to the bar.

"How much do I owe, please?"

"It's all chalked up to the major, sir."

"Well, chalk two ports down again."

A longer bar at the other end of the cellar displayed food. Wordsworth perched himself on a stool and ordered a plate of roast beef, pickles and a potato salad. Boulte's outburst puzzled him. What could have caused it? Fear?

The thought seemed grotesque. A more grotesque idea followed. Was it merely imagination which suggested that Izod had been anxious to get Boulte away?

But thinking of Izod brought back thoughts of Gale. About how friendly were Izod and Gale? They must live within a few hundred yards of each other. A handsome fellow, probably a bit of a womaniser.

"Jealous?" Wordsworth asked himself; and finished his food.

Outside, the sun was shining. He lingered on the sidewalk gazing up at Big Ben, and setting his wristwatch by it. Then he crossed Whitehall, re-entered the Ministry, and made his way to Room Twenty Eight.

A sentry was still on guard. By him stood one of the messengers, whom Wordsworth recognised.

"You're the chap who was on duty the night before last, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes, I am."

"What's your name, please?"

"Albert Dowdy."

"Well, I want to talk to you sometime. How about now?"

"I was just going to get me dinner."

"I shan't keep you more than five minutes."

"All right."

"Surly devil—not saying 'sir' on purpose," decided Wordsworth.

They went into the wrecked room, which was quite empty. Negresco's men—Wordsworth noticed—had already done most of their work.

"The first thing I want you to tell me," he began, "is how many people beside the air vice-marshal had access to this room."

"Nobody at all, sir."

"Nobody? But that's absurd. What about Flying Officer Messiter, for instance?"

"Oh, I forgot him."

The man's watery eyes, his thin lips, the whole yellow parchment of his face went sullen. Wordsworth noticed the peculiar shape of the bald head, and of the ears, which were almost without lobes.

"And how about yourself?" he went on. "You could get in whenever you wanted to."

"No, I couldn't."

"Why not? The key was on your board. Or wasn't it?"

"No, it wasn't. And the cleaning women couldn't get in either. Not unless Messiter was there. Ashdown"—Dowdy's right hand, huge and tattooed, seemed to clench; his left tugged at the lapel of his dark blue jacket—"he had a special lock fitted."

"When?"

"The day he took over the room."

Further questions only increased the man's obstinacy. Wordsworth let him go, and took the electric lift—now in action again—to his own floor. It was obvious, from the mere way in which he spoke their names without giving them their ranks, that Dowdy had hated Ashdown and still hated Messiter. Why?

CHAPTER SIX

I

THAT Friday afternoon Wordsworth spent in routine work, which seemed even more boring, even more futile, than usual. Conington, who had left a note, "Gone snooping as per orders," returned a little after three with the news:

"M.I. five won't tell me a thing about Boulte except that he's seconded to the Air Ministry for special duties and that he's a first-class interpreter in German."

At four, while they were drinking the tea their messenger made for them ("Allegedly with hot water," drawled Conington), Daddy Dorland telephoned to say that he had been taken ill and might be away for a week.

At five, a tall blond girl with broad shoulders, high cheekbones, and an air which blended selfconfidence with efficiency, came in to say:

"I'm sorry to bother you, squadron leader, but Sir George Ramsay is particularly anxious to know how soon Mr. Blinkhorn will be able to get on with the repairs to Room Twenty Eight on the ground floor."

"You're Miss King, I gather?"

"Yes." The girl smiled, showing good teeth between unpainted lips.

"His secretary?"

"Well, not actually. Miss Loftus is really his secretary. Only she's away ill."

Conington thought, "Attractive. Definitely"; but the girl's appearance did not interest Wordsworth.

"Will you tell Sir George," he said pleasantly, "that I hope Mr. Blinkhorn will be able to start tomorrow."

"Thank you, squadron leader. I know he'll be glad to hear that."

"And so will you, I gather?"

"Well, actually, it won't make much difference to me. Because Miss Loftus will be back any day now."

Miss King went out. Conington glanced at one of the routine lists of staff on which they had been working.

"Her christian name's Elsie," he remarked, "and she lives at St. Catherine's Court, Maida Vale. I might drift round there one evening—she rather appeals to my amorous propensities."

"If you try to indulge them with that bint, you'll probably get a sock on the jaw."

The word "bint" was new to Conington. He made a note of it; opened the window, and drawled:

"Let's pack up, shall we? There isn't a cloud in the sky, blast it."

"You go. I'll stay."

2

Wordsworth stayed for another half hour; and then went to collect Minnie Mouse. Sirens moaned as he drove out of the garage. Guns were firing, and one bomb whooshed over—putting the lights out for a second or so—while he drank a solitary whiskey and soda at his club. Afterwards he fell into conversation with a young subaltern, very smart in mess kit, who had "just come up for a binge."

"Dining my girl at Quag's," said the subaltern. "They send a car for you. Then we'll do a round of the night clubs. Cost me a month's pay, I suppose. Believe it or not, the last time I was at the Cellar they rooked me two quid for a bottle of John Haig."

"Is that the Silver Cellar by any chance?"

"Yes. In Soho Square."

The hall porter announced, "There's a car for you, my lord." Alone Wordsworth took out his notecase and re-read

the letter Ashdown had never finished. Then he went to dine—experiencing, once again, that sense of loneliness which is the lot of returning exiles. Pity one hadn't accepted the Resident's offer to stay an extra year at Cape Remittance. One wasn't doing much good here.

He finished his meal, bought himself a cigar and a double brandy in the smoking room, and read the evening papers—one of which carried a stereotyped paragraph about Ashdown's career.

It was nearly ten o'clock—and not a gun firing. A sudden impulse drove him into the hall, and out on to the steps. Rain had begun to fall. He went for his coat, cap and equipment; and asked the porter his best way to Soho Square, which Minnie Mouse found after several detours.

A policeman told him to park by the railings, and indicated the entrance to the Silver Cellar with a grin.

Guns fired again, as the street door, unlatched to his ring, opened and closed quickly. Beyond, hung thick velvet curtains.

"Are you a member, sir?" asked the man who had admitted him.

"Yes. Of course."

He pushed his way through the curtains, descended stone stairs, and found himself in a bright vestibule—on his left a box-office window, in front of him a cellar door.

"Can I see your membership card, please?" asked the woman in the box office.

"I'm afraid I've forgotten to bring it."

"Then I'm sorry, sir, but I shan't be able to let you in."

The woman's voice was vaguely familiar, and vaguely connected with a man's. She and the man—Wordsworth seemed to remember—had been in some kind of trouble. Then the cellar door opened, and a little fellow in a dinner jacket came through the doorway—and memories grew exact.

"Hallo, Dietz," said Wordsworth. "So you're still in the same racket."

"Dickson," corrected the little man, with the oily smile

Wordsworth had not forgotten. "I changed my name two years ago. By deed poll. And this isn't a racket, I promise you, colonel. We keep strictly to the law. Matilda"—he turned to the woman in the box office—"surely you remember Colonel Wordsworth, who was so kind to us in Cape Remittance."

"Why, of course. Only I didn't recognise him in that uniform."

"Can I come in, Dietz? Sorry, I mean Dickson."

"Why, of course, colonel. Of course. We will have a little drink together first. In my office. Afterwards you must be my guest for the cabaret. We have only a very small cabaret."

He led beyond the door, down a narrow passage, and into a businesslike room.

"Whiskey?" he asked. "Brandy? Or perhaps a little champagne?"

Wordsworth chose brandy. They sat down at a tidy table, covered with a check cloth.

"Thanks to you, colonel," said Herman (now Henry) Dickson, "the Resident let me off with a five-hundred-pound fine which still left me quite a nice profit. So that if there is anything I can do to reciprocate, I shall be only too glad."

"Well, to begin with," Wordsworth smiled, "you can leave off calling me colonel, because I'm only a squadron leader these days."

"So I see. We have quite a lot of young Air Force officers at the Silver Cellar. Such nice boys, they are. The R.A.F., I always maintain, will win this war for us. I say 'us,' you understand, because my wife and I are now naturalised."

"That's nice for you. Congratulations." Again Wordsworth smiled. "Tell me something. Are there any senior officers of the R.A.F. among your members?"

"Oh, yes. We have quite a few wing commanders, and one or two group captains."

"And air commodores or air vice-marshals?"

"No. At least I don't think so. I should have to look that up in the books."

"You're lying, aren't you, Dickson?"

The words were still smooth; but they appeared to frighten the man who had been called Dietz.

"We—we have to be discreet," he pleaded. "Sometimes officers don't like to register in their own names. Sometimes they come in plain clothes, you see."

"Was that what Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown used to do?"

"Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown?"

"You heard—Dickson. I'd come clean if I were you. There's no need to be discreet about Ashdown, because he's dead."

3

The proprietor of the Silver Cellar, if he was to be believed, had not known of Ashdown's death; but he knew, and told, quite enough.

"I'd like to meet that girl," said Wordsworth.

"Not before the cabaret, please. She's very temperamental—and it might upset her."

"You don't think she knows either, then?"

"I'm sure she doesn't. She told Matilda, only an hour ago, that she expected the air vice-marshal in this evening."

"Good. I'll break the news to her myself. Is that quite clear?"

"Quite." The little man glanced at a clock on the wall. "The cabaret will begin in half an hour. I will take you along and tell the head waiter that you are my guest."

More stone stairs led down to a cloakroom where Wordsworth left his cap, coat and gasmask, but not his pistol, with an obvious chucker-out. Another cellar door, of painted metal, opened on to the expected scene—complete with smoky atmosphere, clinging couples, and a dais for the musicians, four of them, all coloured. Dickson found Wordsworth a table close to the dais, and whispered orders to his head waiter, who produced a bottle of champagne, leaning over to say:

"If monsieur would care to dance, I will bring over one of the young ladies."

"Thanks. But I think I'll wait."

Sipping his Clicquot, which might have been worse, Wordsworth remembered the Tingel Tangel and The Austria and the defunct Monte Carlo (Dietz's joint) at Cape Remittance, and the fun he had had, once upon a time, at such places. But now that kind of fun had lost its appeal.

"Getting old," he brooded. "Once this war's over, I'll settle down in the country. And I suppose I'll find me a wife. Some girl like Gale would do."

Confound Gale. The sooner one got that young woman out of one's system the better. She had a child—Ashdown's. She was an American. Not that one had anything against Americans. On the contrary. But as wives they were too apt to wear the trousers.

The usual roll of a drum, the usual dowsing of lights, disturbed meditation. Dietz (difficult to think of him as Dickson) mounted the dais.

"Tonight," he announced, "we produce the Six Silver Cellar Kids in a new dance, the Hurricane Hop—and, of course, Florence Desvoeux."

"Good old Florrie," called a young voice from a far table. Another voice at the same table said, "Shut up. You're tight."

The Six Silver Cellar Kids wore imitation Waaf jackets and white flannel shorts. Their legs were bare—and their predispositions obvious. A brunette who, like the Clicquot, might have been worse, blew Wordsworth three kisses before she danced off.

Then two spotlights were focused on the dais—and Florence Desvoeux oozed in and stood by the piano, smiling to the handclaps and just inclining her head.

The immediate impression she made on Wordsworth summed itself up in the phrase, "Slightly debauched canary." "Vest-pocket Venus" followed. But the deep voice, when she began to sing, was the very reverse of a canary's; and her Venushood, on more accurate inspection, proved mostly fake.

She had a neatish figure, all the girl's when you saw her full face, but too much the boy's when she turned, as she did frequently, to the far corners of the floor. The hands were small, but the fingers too thin and slightly clawlike; the feet in the silver slippers about two sizes too large.

The torch singer's medium-length hair, dressed to give it an air of abandon, and lacquered with silver and gold "Hollywood lights," apparently to match the costume she wore, framed a thin face, with a little white beak for nose, two overemphasized slashes of carmine for lips, and a pair of blue eyes which—though she made the greatest possible play with them—seemed, to William Wordsworth, harder and more predatory than most.

"Yours ever so," he caught himself thinking, "but only as long as there's a little something to go on with."

Oh well, she would be more likely to earn a competence that way than this.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

"THE squadron leader and I," said the man who had once called himself Dietz, "are very old friends. He wants to be introduced to you."

"Old friends are the best, aren't they?" smiled the torch singer. "I'm very glad to know you, Squadron Leader Wordsworth."

"Won't you join me in a glass of wine?"

"And some supper," suggested the introducer. "You've certainly earned it tonight, Flossie."

"That last number went ever so well, didn't it?"

"Splendidly," said Wordsworth; and their introducer made himself scarce.

"What would you like to eat, Miss Desvoeux?" he went on.

"Well, I don't really know that I ought to eat yet. You see, I'm expecting a friend. I can't make out what's been keeping him. Of course he's ever such a busy man. But he always gets here in time to hear me sing."

"Naturally."

She bridled happily, and took the chair he had been holding.

"He's never been as late as this," she continued. "Never. I don't see why I should wait any longer. Can I have caviar? They've got some."

"You can have anything you like, Miss Desvoeux."

"Oh, don't call me that. It isn't my real name anyway. Just call me Flossie. Everyone else does. What's your other name? William. Then I shall call you Bill."

She tossed off the first measure of champagne he poured her, and held out her glass for another. After the caviar, she demanded a wing of chicken and some salad. Conversation proved easy—as long as one confined it to Flossie.

"I've worked ever so hard to get where I am, Bill," she confided. "But what I really want to be is on the radio. It's such good publicity. Do you know anybody in the B.B.C.?"

"No. I'm afraid I don't."

"Neither does Mar—" She stopped.

"Is that the gentleman you were expecting?"

"Well, actually, it is. I don't see why you shouldn't know his name, Bill. It's Marcus Ashdown. He's in the R.A.F., too."

"Have you known him long?"

"Oh, rather. We're ever such old friends. Almost ever since the war started. But I don't suppose he'll come now. Is the blitz still on?"

"It was when I arrived."

"I hope it's over soon. I don't want to sleep here tonight. I slept here last night. And the night before. Can I have some coffee, Bill, and just a teeny weeny Cointreau, and a little box of Turkish cigarettes? Then we'll dance if you'd like to. I simply adore dancing."

She danced—he discovered almost immediately—very much better than she sang. Holding her, one was conscious of an attraction—purely physical, and obviously practised, yet none the less potent for its artificiality.

The scent she used—he made sure after some thought—was the same as Millicent Ashdown's. Her jewelry, of which she affected plenty, could have been bought for a very few pounds.

After half an hour they returned to their table. More members were coming in by then. Whenever the door opened, she glanced away from him.

"What's the time?" she asked suddenly.

"Getting on for two, I imagine." He looked at his wrist-watch. "No. It's past that."

"Then he won't come now. Could you find out if the all clear's gone?"

A naval man at the next table leaned across to tell them, "The wind's gone round to the west. It was raining curs and pussies when I got here—and there's been nothing doing for the best part of an hour."

"Then don't you think we might risk it?" asked Wordsworth. "I've got my car outside."

Her eyes considered him, coldly, but not without interest, for the best part of thirty seconds.

"All right, Bill," she said at last. "You pay and I'll be getting my things."

She oozed off. It seemed unnecessary to tell her that the cost of their entertainment had been on the house.

2

Flossie materialised by the box-office window in a hat and a dark street frock. She wore rubber boots and carried an umbrella. From her shoulders hung a cape of silver fox.

"I've kept you waiting ever so long," she said to Wordsworth, and to the woman at the glass window, "Cheerio, Matilda. See you tomorrow evening."

Soho Square was pitch black and loud with raindrops. Wordsworth took her arm, and flashed his torch towards the railings. Someone shouted, "Careful with that light, please." She held her umbrella over him while he replaced Minnie Mouse's distributor arm and unlocked the low door.

"And where do we go from here?" he asked, once they were seated.

"I'll show you. I'm rather good at seeing in the dark."

Twelve minutes brought them to a block of flats not half a mile from Wordsworth's own. A blue light announced "Shelter."

"It's the garage actually," she explained. "If you drive in we shan't get wet."

At the bottom of the ramp they were met by a tall man

with the air raid warden's "W" on his white helmet, who said, "Oh, it's you, is it, Miss Desvoeux," and showed them where to park.

In other alcoves were bunks—one of their occupants, a woman, snoring loudly.

"I wouldn't sleep down here for a farm," said Flossie; and led up stone stairs, through a doorway, and across thick carpets to a lift, which decanted them on the second floor.

She took a latchkey from her bag and inserted it in a Yale lock.

"Home, sweet home," she whispered. "Come on in, Bill."

As she closed the door and switched on the one ceiling light in a baby hall, they heard first a distant and then nearby sirens sounding the sustained note of the all clear.

"Whenever I hear that," said Flossie, "it makes me feel—well, you know what I mean, don't you, darling"; and suddenly, with her bag still on one wrist and her wet umbrella dangling from the other, she was snuggling herself into his arms, kissing him frantically.

She certainly did know how to kiss.

"Now I'm going to make myself comfy," she went on, standing away from him. "I'll find you some pyjamas. Then we'll have a drink and a snack."

She ran off before Wordsworth could think of anything to say. "Awkward," he decided. "I suppose I've got to play Saint Anthony. Seems a pity, though."

But as he unslung his gasmask, took off his coat and laid them on the only chair available, the galvanic effect of Flossie's kisses began to wear off.

He removed his equipment. She called to him, through a half open door, "Go into the lounge, Bill, and turn on the fire, there's a dear." He called back, "All right."

The lounge, as she called it, was a tiny square room. Under the centre light stood a little round table, already laid for two. A kidney-shaped table by the window displayed various photographs, all masculine and all in regimental frames. Curious, Wordsworth approached the table, and recognised the

central photograph for Ashdown, wearing the broad single stripe of what the irreverent call an "air commode."

With one exception, all the other photographs, many signed, were also of officers. The exception intrigued him. He picked it up and carried it under the light. A young man, obviously posed by a cheap photographer, so that his bandolier and his sergeant's stripes should show to best advantage, stared straight at the camera from under a gunner's cap peak, with eyes just a little too small for his face. The sergeant sported a straggly moustache above a slack mouth. An inscription in surprisingly neat handwriting read, "Florence from Ned. Embarkation leave. Sept. 1939."

On the whole, an uninteresting face—except for one characteristic which Wordsworth found most intriguing—the ears. Only twice had he seen similar ears, almost lobeless—the first time on a native at Cape Remittance, the second time at the Air Ministry this very (no, yesterday) afternoon.

He replaced the sergeant's photograph just before the entrance of Flossie—wearing a purple negligé and a pair of mules, and carrying a tray with a decanter, glasses, and two napkin-covered plates.

"Everything's laid out on the bed. You go and make yourself comfy now, Bill."

"There's something I've got to tell you first."

She put the tray on the centre table and drew the napkins from the two plates. Her eyes displayed annoyance.

"It can't be anything very important," she said; "otherwise you'd have told me sooner. I expect you're going to tell me you're married."

"No. I'm not married. Are you?"

"Yes." She spoke slowly. "For what it's worth—a sergeant's wife's separation allowance. Ned had no right to join up in the Territorials before the war. It wasn't fair to me. He ought to have waited till they conscripted him."

The sentiment irritated Wordsworth. Habit held him once more. It was the ex-chief of police who said:

"The thing I've got to tell you, my dear, is that your friend, Marcus Ashdown, was killed on Wednesday night."

3

Flossie's tears had been facile; but her emotion—it seemed to Wordsworth—entirely genuine. Seated at the table now, she was still dabbing her eyes with a tiny handkerchief.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" she asked.

"I couldn't very well tell you at the club."

"No. I suppose you couldn't. Give me a drink, Bill. I——"

More tears fell. He began to feel sorry for her.

"Here, swallow this."

The full glass clinked against her teeth. Some of the drink spilled over her negligé. He mopped it off with a napkin. The poor little floozy! Not much stamina about her. Gale, now? She wouldn't have cried, even if she'd still been in love with the man. Oh, blast Gale.

Flossie emptied the glass; and held it out for more.

"You have some, too," she said. "Don't go yet. Oh dear, and I thought we were going to have such a good time."

She dabbed her eyes dry; and swigged off her second whiskey with a steady hand.

"Light me a cigarette, Bill," she went on. "I'm better. But of course we can't now. Because I should feel so beastly about it afterwards. Marcus was jolly good to me. He gave me my silver foxes. Not that he was really in love with me. Nobody's ever been really in love with me, except Ned."

Words petered out. She stretched a hand across the table. He took it automatically.

"And you," he suggested, "aren't in love with Ned?"

"No. Though I was once. Just for a week or so. He was ever so sweet when we were first married. Then his father started to interfere. He told Ned he was spoiling me."

She fell silent again. He was still holding her hand.

"What's Ned's other name?" he asked.

"Dowdy. That's why I had to change it when I went into cabaret." And suddenly she began to laugh, "Dowdy! Just imagine a torch singer calling herself Dowdy. Give me another drink, Bill. I want to get tight. I want to get ever so tight. So as I shan't think about Marcus. Not that I was in love with Marcus. We just used to have good times together."

"I don't think, if I were you, Flossie, that I'd take any more tonight."

He relinquished her fingers and rose. Still in her chair, she began to protest, "I thought you were more of a sport, Bill. Why the hell shouldn't I get tight if I want to? You're not going, are you?"

"I'm afraid I must. You see, I've got to be on duty by nine."

"Oh, all right." She, too, rose. He saw that her eyes were already hazed. "If you must, you must. Only you'll come and see me again, won't you, Bill? Especially as you're not married. My God, I wish I weren't. But Ned won't give me a divorce, though he knows about everything. That's his father's doing, the interfering tale-bearing old swine."

She followed Wordsworth into the hall; stood by, silent, while he gathered up and put on his gear. Then she repeated her original performance, whispering:

"You will come and see me again, won't you, Bill darling? Promise."

Her moist lips had not lost their galvanism.

He promised; and went.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

IT WAS nearly five o'clock on the Saturday morning when Wordsworth stood before the mirror in his own bedroom, thinking, "That floozy certainly has made her mark." Then he washed away the lipstick from his left cheek; found more of it, including one dab of carmine on his blue collar; undressed, and flopped into bed.

He woke to hear breakfast being laid in the sitting room; scrambled through his food and toilet, and arrived at the Air Ministry to find Conington already there.

"You're looking a bit pie-eyed this morning, W.W."

"And feeling it. Anything doing?"

"Quite a lot. To begin with, your old pal, George Ramsay, wants you to go and see him at eleven-thirty—and to go on with, I've dredged up some interesting information about Anthony Boulte."

"Source, please?"

"The source can't be divulged, W.W. But the information's accurate."

"All right. Fire ahead."

Conington picked up a paper, scrawled with unreadable hieroglyphics which might have been shorthand.

"Boulte's father," he began, "was Sir Benjamin Boulte, Bart. He died in nineteen-ten. Boulte's mother married, in nineteen-sixteen, a chap called Peter Patterson, by whom she had another son, Derek. Peter Patterson was killed in France about an hour before the armistice—and Derek this autumn."

"What was he in?"

"An R. A. F. bombing squadron."

"Which one?"

"I don't know. But I can easily find out."

Conington lit a cigarette.

"You certainly aren't at your brightest this morning," he went on. "Doesn't it strike you that if Boulte's father was a baronet, he ought to be one?"

"Are you implying that he's an actual as well as a metaphorical bastard, Guy?"

"Yes."

A routine inquiry on the telephone interrupted them. They dealt with it. Then Conington continued his tale.

"Boulte won his D.S.O. at Passchendaele as a subaltern. With a bit of luck, it might have been the Victoria Cross. After the war he resigned his commission and joined the Auxiliaries, erroneously known as the Black and Tans. His nickname in those days was the Killer—and I gather that he earned it. Afterwards he went into the armament business."

"Gun running?"

"More or less. It seems that our precious pacifist government wouldn't sell arms to belligerents, so they sold them to the Italians, for anything they'd fetch—and the Eyeties passed them on at three hundred per cent profit. Boulte, by the way, speaks Italian as well as he speaks German, and a few Balkan lingos into the bargain. He married a Bulgarian, or she may have been a Yugoslav. She died some years ago. Until Derek was killed Boulte lived with his mother. Apparently he's got money. Rather a queer history."

"Very," said Wordsworth; and Conington, who had been restraining his curiosity for the best part of three days, put the pointblank question:

"Look here, what are you driving at, W.W.? From the way you're going on anybody would imagine that Ashdown had been murdered."

"That's precisely what I've been imagining ever since I first examined Room Twenty Eight."

Conington put more questions. Wordsworth elaborated his theory. Shells played the funniest tricks. But . . .

"You think it was some kind of infernal machine, I gather?"

"Yes, Guy. With a time fuze."

They discussed the matter for twenty minutes, at the end of which Conington said:

"Supposing you're right, we ought to put the whole thing up to Daddy Dorland."

"And let him write a minute about it. Not on your life, Guy. If this is a murder, I'm going to find out who did it on my own."

"Well, if you want to act on your own initiative, your blood be on your own head. You know what this department's like."

"A minor public school," quoted Wordsworth, "with a weak headmaster and a lot of inefficient ushers. That's just why I'm not going to Daddy, or Quaritch, until I've got my facts right."

"And then?"

"Then I'll see. Meanwhile you keep your mouth shut, Guy. And, if you can, get me some dope on George Ramsay. Half past eleven for him, I think you said; and it's twenty past already. So ta-ta."

2

Henry Silcox rose from his desk and held out a gnarled hand, saying, "Morning, Wordsworth. He won't be more than five minutes. Have a gasper, if you can smoke the blood-stained things."

He passed over the box. Wordsworth lit up.

"You're in a nice jam," went on Silcox, opening his mouth to display those awful teeth. "Why didn't you tell me you'd given that adjectival fuze to Arty Atkinson? He and my master see each other nearly every day."

Miss King entered while he was still speaking; said, "Good morning, squadron leader. Sir George is free now, Mr. Silcox," and sat down to her typewriter, which Wordsworth

could hear clacking furiously as he was led along the corridor to Room Forty Two.

"Squadron Leader Wordsworth, Sir George," announced Silcox; and left them alone.

George Ramsay sat at his big desk with the light behind him. One of the graphs, Wordsworth noticed, had been removed from the right-hand wall. Two or three more shell-cases had been added to the collection on the table.

"Sit down," said George Ramsay; and hesitated, dry-shaving his scarred cheek with a long hand.

He seemed completely at ease; but one of his elephantine ears moved, ever so slightly, as he went on:

"You're wearing the old R.F.C. wings, I observe. What squadron were you in last time?"

Wordsworth told him.

"You were transferred from the Horse Artillery, I believe."

"Yes, Sir George."

"And left the service in nineteen-twenty. Tell me, what have you been doing with yourself since then?"

"I was chief of police at Cape Remittance."

"I see."

Ramsay hesitated again. He picked up a paper knife; and began playing with it.

"About that fuze," he continued. "I understand you did find it, and that you handed it over to Professor Atkinson."

"I did, Sir George."

"From which one gathers that you were not quite satisfied about its being"—for the third time Ramsay hesitated—"the genuine article."

Wordsworth kept silence, his dark eyes clashing with Ramsay's, gray-green and purposeful under that penthouse of a forehead with its thatch of gray-gold hair.

"I don't mind telling you," Ramsay's voice changed, seemed to become a shade more affable, "that I had the same idea myself. I happen to know a good deal about explosives. And about"—he glanced at the collection on the table—"what

the hoi-polloi, journalists and the alleged intelligence officers of the Ministry of Home Security are pleased to describe as shrapnel. All the same, Wordsworth, *I* know when to let sleeping dogs lie."

Their eyes clashed again. "Is that a threat?" thought Wordsworth; and Ramsay seemed to read his mind; for he continued, still affable:

"That's off the record, as they say in America. I'm a mere civilian. I've no authority in this matter. But from what Professor Atkinson told me, I don't believe you're going to be able to prove anything. Whoever did the job was too clever. And anyway, Ashdown's no loss."

The last words grated between Ramsay's teeth. For the first time, he seemed completely human.

"I wonder if you'd mind telling me something," said Wordsworth. "What, precisely, was Ashdown's job?"

The door opened, and Miss King came in with a pink slip which she laid on the desk.

"Ask him to wait," Ramsay told her; and to Wordsworth, with the door closed again, he said:

"That's rather a difficult question to answer. As far as I know, Ashdown was brought in from one of the bomber groups to form a new department, a kind of link between Plans, Operations and Supply. I believe it was his own scheme. But I'm not sure about that. Anyway the new department hadn't begun to function. Presumably they needed Treasury sanction first."

On which Sir George Ramsay rose to show that the interview was at an end.

3

Conington took that Saturday afternoon off, so Wordsworth spent it alone. The more he considered his talk with Ramsay, the more unsatisfactory did it appear. In effect, the man had told him to lay off. Why? Because he had murdered Ashdown?

But so far there was no proof—no legal proof anyway—that Ashdown had been murdered. So why not take the advice given, and let sleeping dogs lie?

"I suppose I ought to," he argued. Habit, nevertheless, continued strong.

Granted motive—and what stronger motive than a passion for Ashdown's wife?—George Ramsay might be the murderer. While other suspects could be found in the Dowdys—father and son acting in collusion; or—only in his case motive was so far lacking—Boulte.

"Dangerous bloke, Boulte," ruminated Wordsworth. "And Izod certainly tried to pocket that fuze while I wasn't looking."

Thought of Izod, however, brought renewed thoughts of Gale. Why shouldn't he run down to Tapworth tomorrow afternoon? Guy would be back by lunch time. And anyway they never had much to do Sundays—it was only the minor public school code that really kept them to their desks.

"So it's you, is it?" said Gale, over the telephone a few minutes later. "Tomorrow about half past two? All right. Only if I'm a little late you mustn't mind waiting for me."

She had sounded—he thought—quite glad to hear from him.

Good!

CHAPTER NINE

I

AT ABOUT three o'clock on Sunday morning, Wordsworth—heavily asleep—started up to the crash of nearby bombs, and a tinkle of glass. Opening the lower window of his bedroom, he could smell high explosive, and hear shouted orders.

“None of my business,” he decided; and went back to bed, waking at seven to find the electric current off. This meant no tea.

He dressed, bathed and shaved by candlelight. At eight, the electricity came on again.

“Downham Square’s flat,” announced the servant who brought his breakfast. “They say it’s a land mine.”

Walking through the square to his garage he observed all its houses still standing, though many windows were broken.

“Ardly Street,” a policeman informed him. “Nobody hurt as far as I know. Why don’t you chaps do a bit more reprising on Berlin? That’d stop ’em. The Huns always were better at dishing it out than at taking it.”

“I’ll put your views before the Chief of the Air Staff the moment I see him,” laughed Wordsworth, who felt thoroughly rested and strangely gay.

His morning’s work entailed a little dictation, for which “the pool” provided him with a shorthand typist, who had obviously never taken down a minute in her life.

“I only joined this week,” she confided. “I’m more used to literary work than this sort of thing. Do you happen to know—?” She named a fairly eminent author. “I only left him because he joined up. So silly of him at his age.”

By eleven she brought back her typescripts, and took them away for the necessary corrections.

"It's going to be foggy," she said. "I simply hate fog, don't you?"

Wordsworth signed the papers and threw them into the Out tray; read his *Sunday Times* for half an hour, and decided not to wait for Guy.

2

It was always a relief—thought Wordsworth—to escape from this prison of a building, where very few people ever gave one the customary good morning of the Fighting Services. And today this relief had become sheer joy.

"Feel like a kid," he decided as he started up Minnie Mouse. "Feel I could hug that girl to death—if she'd let me." And out of London he drove faster than his wont.

Finchley Road was roped off for several hundred yards. Sirens sounded, and a policeman hitched his gasmask to the ready, as Wordsworth took the diversion. On the bypass he saw a mother beckoning her child in from play. Just before "garage corner" an officer in wing commander's uniform stopped him and asked for a lift.

"I'm going up the Great North," said Wordsworth.

"Sorry. I'm trying to get to Tring."

He drove on again, through slathers of mist, till his trip mileage read thirty-five; and his clock a quarter to one. Half a mile farther on he saw a roadhouse and pulled up for lunch.

The beginning of a tolerable meal was rendered hideous by the blare of the one o'clock news, repeating in somewhat less grammatical English various items already perused in his *Sunday Times*. "Once this war's over," he caught himself thinking, "I'll never listen to the radio again."

This horror turned off, two fat women at a nearby table fell to discussing rations, and the difficulty of obtaining hair-pins, lipsticks or maids.

He escaped by two o'clock, after a cup of so-called coffee, which seemed to prove that there would always be an Eng-

land, and that Britons would never be slaves to the percolator. Outside, a sun as watery as the coffee illuminated thinning mists.

Tapworth proved larger, and more urban, than he had imagined it, with several factories and long rows of bungalowoid homes. But Little Tapworth was the English village at its best; and Manor Cottage, to which an urchin directed him, the kind of little house one dreamed of in Cape Remittance during the monsoons.

A flagged path led under a pergola to a gabled stone porch, either side of which were low mullioned windows. As he walked up the path—once more with that strange excitement on him—an oldish woman in black clothes and steel spectacles came through the doorway under the porch.

"You'll be Squadron Leader Wordsworth," she said. "I'm Mrs. Johnson's housekeeper. She's out on one of these A.R.P. practices, as though she hadn't enough to do without that. Master Michael's in the garden. Mrs. Johnson thought he might keep you amused for half an hour. She won't be longer."

"And what is your name?" asked Wordsworth.

"Eliza Bigland. I've been with Mrs. Johnson ever since she came over from the States."

Mrs. (by courtesy) Bigland led along a hall which traversed the whole house to a curtained door, and out into a halfacre of garden.

"Master Michael," she called.

The boy who came running between the flower beds, now planted with vegetables, was tall and singularly selfpossessed for his age. He had his mother's golden brown eyes, and a mop of reddish brown hair.

"Hallo," he began, holding out a grubby hand. "You're just in time. Do you know anything about bows and arrows? Because I've just broken the string of my bow and I simply can't put on a new one."

He held out the miniature bow and the new string, which Wordsworth fitted with becoming gravity.

"I'm a rotten shot," went on the boy. "But I expect I'll improve with practice."

He led back between the beds towards an outhouse, on which hung a little target. Several arrows were stuck in the ground.

"Would you care to have a shot?" he asked.

"Not for the moment. I'll watch you."

The first two arrows missed. ("I told you so," said Michael.) But the third hit the outer edge of the target and the fourth just touched the gold.

"Whoops," said Michael. "That's more like it. I don't think I'll shoot any more now. Are you quite sure you don't want to?"

"Quite."

"Then let's sit down, shall we?"

He perched himself on a wheelbarrow near the shed. Wordsworth, thinking, "Nice kid. Funny he should be Ash-down's," straddled an iron garden chair.

"What kind of planes do you fly?" asked the boy. "Bombers or fighters?"

"I'm afraid I'm too old for flying now."

"Haven't you even got your wings?"

"Yes. I've got those."

"When did you get them?"

The catechism continued, while Wordsworth, who had never cared much for children, found himself taking more and more of a fancy to this one. Then a bicycle bell rang three times from the road, and Michael shouted, "That's mummy," and ran off towards the house.

3

Gale, wheeling her cycle up the flagged path, wore a short camel's hair coat and blue slacks. Her auburn head was bare. A tin hat and a gasmask hung at her side.

"Hallo," she began. "I'm sorry I'm late. Michael, put this bike away for me, there's a dear. And don't forget to lock up the shed and give nanny the key."

She dropped her equipment on to a settle in the hall; told Wordsworth to take off his coat; called, "Oh, Eliza, can I have my coffee and sandwiches, please?" and led into a square room with chintz curtains, an open fireplace in which logs burned, and a few pieces of really good furniture.

"I've had nothing to eat since breakfast," she confessed. "And when I get hungry, I get cross. Did Michael bore you very much?"

"Far from it."

"Somehow I didn't imagine he would."

She subsided into a deep chair. Almost at once, Mrs. Bigland appeared wheeling a small two-tiered dinner wagon.

"I've brought another cup," she said. "In case Squadron Leader Wordsworth would like some coffee."

She filled two cups, and went out, Gale calling after her, "Look after Michael for me. I'm not in the mood to be talked at."

Wordsworth took the hint. She ate and drank ravenously.

"More coffee?" he asked.

"Please. I'll be all right in a minute or two."

"You appear to have been overdoing it?"

"That's what Eliza's always telling me. How do you like our coffee?"

"It's grand."

"That's how they make it in New Orleans."

She finished her sandwiches. He offered her a cigarette. She puffed thoughtfully, stretching neat feet towards the fire.

"You realise," she began, "that I'm Mrs. Johnson down here. Eliza knows everything, by the way. But everybody else thinks I'm a widow. Everybody else including Frank Izod, whom I fancy you know."

She fell silent again, eyeing him speculatively. Today he felt curiously at ease with her, as though they had known each other for a longish time. More curiously, it seemed to him that she shared this feeling. "I'm glad you're here," she seemed to be saying. "I like you."

He said, taking the stub of cigarette she held out and throwing it on the fire, "Yes. I know Izod. But only slightly. You know Boulte, too, I expect."

"Yes. And I dislike him intensely. But Frank won't hear a word against him. Talk about David and Jonathan. I honestly believe that if Boulte were to commit a murder, Frank would let himself be hanged for it. And I can easily imagine Boulte committing a murder if he had sufficient provocation—or even if he thought he had. That's why I couldn't help wondering, when you told me about Marcus——"

She broke off. Automatically Wordsworth prompted her.

"Didn't Boulte like Ashdown?" he asked.

"No. He hated him."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Frank let it out by accident. He wouldn't tell me any more."

So Boulte, too, had a motive, which one must find out.

Their talk turned to the war.

"I loathe it," said Gale frankly. "It should never have been allowed to happen. It couldn't have happened if our politicians had known their business."

"What do you mean by 'ours'? England's or America's?"

"Both," snapped Gale. "We ought to have got together years ago. The moment Germany started rearming."

She elaborated her theory. The telephone rang. She picked up the instrument. "No," she said. "Not this afternoon, Frank. I'm too tired. And I think I'd rather go up by train tomorrow. It's so foggy these mornings."

Just as she was recradling the instrument, Michael came in, asking, "Is it all right now, mummy? I put your bike away and locked the shed up."

"Yes. I can just bear you now, if you don't talk too much."

"I won't talk at all unless you ask me things."

Gale laughed, and took him on her lap. In that moment she seemed all the young mother. Yet at the same time there was much of the girl, almost of the virgin, about her. And to

Wordsworth the combination carried a new, almost irresistible appeal.

Hitherto, he realised with an unpleasant shock, his views about young women had been crude to the point of brutality—imagination dividing them into two groups, those with whom one could, or could not, conceive oneself in bed. This young woman belonged to neither category. And the sudden recollection that she had been Ashdown's very nearly made one see red.

They were talking again by then. He asked her when she had been in New Orleans.

"I was born and brought up there," she said.

"I wonder you didn't go back when the war started."

"It was suggested. As things have turned out, it might have been better. But I couldn't see it that way. It seemed cowardly. And I hate cowardice. The men of my family have always been soldiers."

"I'm not going to be a soldier when I grow up," interrupted Michael. "I'm going to be an airman."

"You shut up for once, darling," said Gale. "Or, better still, run and tell nanny that we'll have tea at once. Because," she explained to Wordsworth as Michael left them, "it's getting dark already and you'll have an awful job finding your way back to London if you don't start soon."

At which exact moment, they heard the drone of the plane.

CHAPTER TEN

I

"ONE of ours?" asked Gale.

"I don't think so. It sounds more like a Hun to me."

They had run out beyond the porch, and were staring up and round the gray skies. The drone of the aircraft engine receded; approached again.

"Visibility's less than a thousand feet," said Wordsworth. "It sounds as though he'd lost himself. By jove, there he is, just over that hill."

Gale's eyes followed his pointing finger. But the winged shape had already vanished—and almost immediately she asked, "What was that?"

"His machine guns, I imagine. What's behind that hill?"

"Open country mostly. But there are one or two farms."

The hollow burst of three bombs followed—then a ragged salvo of gunfire. They saw the aircraft again—shellbursts flashing between it and them. Two miles away, a siren let out its first moan. Gale said, "Lordy, I'm on duty. I'll have to get my bicycle."

"Let me drive you. It'll be quicker."

"That would be nice of you."

She ran into the house; emerged carrying her tin hat and gasmask, his coat over her arm. The aircraft had disappeared again; but its high drone seemed to be right overhead.

"Something wrong with his engine," said Wordsworth, opening the car for her. The droning ceased. He started his own engine. Just as he did so, they heard what might have been the distant whoosh of a colossal bomb, followed by a noise that might have been made by two lorries colliding head on.

"What was that?" repeated Gale.

"Sounds as though the Archies might have got him. Which way?"

Their way took them to the far end of the darkling village, all cottagers at their doors. Outside the door of the wooden British Legion hut, in front of which a motor ambulance was parked, stood a man in plus fours and a workman with a bicycle.

The man in plus fours was cursing, "Nobody on duty at the phone. Nobody from the ambulance squad. No stretcher bearers. If we win this bloody war, it'll be an accident."

"I'm here," said Gale, leaping from Minnie Mouse.

"But you can't drive the ambulance, Mrs. Johnson. And it's wanted urgent. At Smart's Farm. If I hadn't heard the phone myself——"

"I can drive the ambulance all right, Mr. Pennyfather," said Gale; and ran to it, jumped in, started it up. Wordsworth, for once forgetting to dish Minnie Mouse's engine, followed her. A middle-aged woman cycled up. Gale called, "Get in at the back, Mrs. Egmont. We're in a hurry."

"Where are we going?"

"Smart's Farm."

The back doors of the ambulance were pulled open; clicked shut. Gale let in first gear. Fifteen seconds later Tapworth Village lay behind them and they were circling the hill above which Wordsworth had seen the aircraft. He noticed that Gale's face had temporarily lost much of its beauty. Her mouth was set. Viciously, she slammed top gear home, put her foot down.

"Take it easy," he suggested. "We might meet something."

For answer, she blared on her horn.

Fields swung by; a villa from whose gate a woman waved as though to stop them. They took a right-hand turn on their off wheels, missing a man in the uniform of the Home Guard by an ant's breadth; made an open gate, a rough road only just visible in the increasing gloom, twin haystacks, another

gate, also open, by which stood a youth. Beyond, loomed farm outbuildings.

Gale pulled up. The youth said, "It's mother. She's hit bad. Father's doing what he can. In the kitchen. I'll show you."

The three of them jumped out, Mrs. Egmont carrying the first-aid box; and followed the youth between the outbuildings to the back door and into the kitchen of the farm.

A woman was lying on a horsehair sofa. Over her, swabbing at one naked shoulder from which blood still oozed, stood a bearded man in corduroys.

"I'll take over now, Smart," said Mrs. Egmont, in a voice that carried a note of semi-feudal authority. "What happened?"

"She was just shutting up the fowls. The swine must have seen her. He turned on his machine guns."

"How are you feeling, Mrs. Smart?"

"My breast hurts me."

"We'll soon have you out of pain." Mrs. Egmont unstrapped her box; and opened a phial of morphia tablets. "Get me a glass of water, Smart."

Gale ran to help. They stripped off the woman's bodice.

"Hot water," ordered Gale. Wordsworth went to the sink; filled a pannikin.

"The sooner she's in hospital the better," said Mrs. Egmont. "Somebody get a stretcher. They're in the ambulance."

The youth followed Wordsworth out. It was blackout time, with a ground mist rising.

"I think mother's going to die," he said. "He got her twice. One in the shoulder, and one in the right breast. Did you hear him come down? Must have been near Frog's Marsh by the sound of it. I wanted to go and see. But of course I couldn't. We'll have to let Florence know about this. She's my sister and lives in London. Calls herself by some fancy French name. Father won't have anything to do with her. He says she's a regular little tart."

They found the stretcher and blankets; carried them back.

Mrs. Egmont was just saying, "That's all we can do. You'll have to drive carefully, Mrs. Johnson. She mustn't be jolted."

Smart asked, "Could I come along to the hospital?"

"Yes. If you like."

He and Wordsworth lifted his wife on to the stretcher. She seemed to have passed out. Wordsworth noticed the blue "M.½" which Mrs. Egmont had pencilled on her forehead after giving her the morphia. They carried her out of the kitchen and slid her into the ambulance, which Gale illuminated with a torch.

"I ought to have turned this machine," said Gale, handing Wordsworth the torch. "Steer me round, will you?"

The manoeuvre proved rather difficult. She had to reverse four times.

"I think we'll just do it," said Gale as he climbed up beside her. "Mrs. Egmont thinks she's a transfusion case. Confound this fog."

She drove carefully back through the two gates. Half a mile along the road by which they had come, she turned to the right.

"We're making for the Cottage Hospital," she explained. "They're expecting us. Mrs. Egmont telephoned. She's very efficient, don't you think?"

"I think you both are."

"Oh, one does what one can."

2

By the time they had deposited their casualty at the little hospital, visibility in the beam of their one masked headlamp was less than a dozen yards.

"Hadn't you better let me drive?" suggested Wordsworth.

"You don't know the way," said Gale. "Besides, my eyes are younger than yours."

Her selfcertainty, and maybe her reference to the gap between their ages, annoyed Wordsworth. But they were already off, and he kept silence. Twenty careful minutes brought them back to the hut.

Gale parked the ambulance, and the three of them, Mrs. Egmont leading, went in. The A.R.P. post was fully manned by then; and Mr. Pennyfather, seated at one of the tables, pacified.

"You've done quite enough for today, Mrs. Johnson," he said, fingering a waxed moustache. "Just let me have your report, and then you'd better be off home."

"I'll make the report," said Mrs. Egmont. "Any tea going?"

A gawky girl brought them three cups and slabs of cake. Wordsworth noticed that Gale had forgotten her own coat.

"You must have been frozen," he said. "Drink that up and I'll drive you home."

She thanked him; and smiled, "Well, good night, everybody." He took her arm as they went out, saying, "You really ought to take more care of yourself. You remembered to bring my coat but not your own."

"How American of you," laughed Gale. "Americans always coddle their womenfolk. I'm perfectly all right."

He handed her into Minnie Mouse. As they started, an army lorry blundered by.

"You'll never make London in this fog," she said. "So I'd better put you up for the night."

The suggestion excited him. He attempted to decline.

"Rubbish. You'll sleep on the sofa in the sitting room—and like it. Left here. Now right. Who can that be? Look. By the porch."

Looking, Wordsworth saw a shadowy figure. He braked, stopped his engine and jumped out. The figure called, "I am a German airman. I am wounded. I wish to surrender"; and came down the flagged path.

"Put your hands up," snapped Wordsworth. The figure obeyed. He fumbled at its waist; found a pistol holster; jerked out the tiny weapon. Behind him he heard Gale breathe, just once, through her nostrils.

"Can you open the door?" he asked.

She went past him. He heard her key turn; saw light

through a pulled-back curtain; gripped his prisoner by the elbow; steered him into the hall.

The German was little more than a boy. And an undersized boy at that. He wore no cap on his close-cropped bullet head. Blue eyes stared from a round white sullen face with pig lips. An Iron Cross dangled low on the stained jacket with the coloured tabs.

"Where are you wounded?" asked Wordsworth.

"Here. And here." He pointed to his left side, to his right knee. "Can I sit down, please?"

The Boche boy sank on to the oak settle. Automatically Wordsworth took out and opened his cigarette case.

"Smoke?" he asked—and felt the case struck from his hands.

The case fell, spilling cigarettes over the carpet. He heard a voice barely recognisable for Gale's, taut with suppressed fury.

"Not in my house," Gale was saying. "If I had my way, I'd shoot him out of hand."

A face peered from a door. She called sharply, "You keep out of this, Michael." Michael's face disappeared. She turned on Wordsworth, "I'm going to phone for the police. They can give him cigarettes and tea if they like. I'm damned if I will. He ought to be lynched."

She ran to the sitting room; clicked on the light. Wordsworth heard her dial, and the tense, "This is Mrs. Johnson of Manor Cottage. I have a Hun here . . . Yes. An airman . . . Come and get him, please. Quickly."

She returned. The boy stared at her.

"Can I have some water?" he asked.

"Weren't you taught to stand up when you address a lady?"

"Pardon?"

"Stand up," said Gale; and after he had obeyed, "You'll get nothing in my house. Nothing. Except a whip if you don't behave yourself. What did they give you that medal for? Murdering women and children, I suppose."

Then heavy boots pounded up the flags, and the front-door bell rang—for the village police station was less than a hundred yards away.

3

The little clock on the sitting room mantelpiece pointed a quarter to nine. They had finished supper some while ago. Michael was in bed, and Eliza Bigland washing up.

Gale, in a brown housefrock with a cigarette between her lips, stretched a hand to the telephone, saying:

"If you don't mind, William, I'd just like to find out how our casualty's getting on."

They had come to christian names during a longish dispute about her behaviour to the Boche airman. "You men," he remembered her chiding, "are too soft. And a nice mess you've made of the world anyway. There'll never be real peace until the women of the world enforce it."

What a lovely voice she had, when she wasn't in a rage.

The report from the hospital was noncommittal. Gale re-cradled the telephone.

"Do you realise," she began, "how much you know about me, and how little I know about you? For all I'm aware, you may be a married man with a large family. Though somehow or other, I can't believe that."

"Why not?"

"I don't exactly know. But to me you look like a bachelor, and from those medals you must be over forty."

"Forty-three to be accurate. And you're quite right—I've not acquired a wife so far."

"Any reason?"

"No. I'm not really prejudiced one way or the other. I suppose it's just because I don't happen to have met the right girl. You see, I've been out of England ever since the last war."

"Where, William?"

He told her, mentioning casually that he had been in the police service.

"I rather suspected that, the first time I talked with you on the telephone. When you came to Bond Street I was almost sure of it."

"But how on earth——"

"It's a little difficult to explain. Maybe it's because I've so often imagined—and I can't explain that either—that Marcus might be murdered. He wasn't, I suppose?"

"Of course not," lied Wordsworth; but his eyes must have given him away. For after a longish pause Gale said:

"I take that to mean that I'm not to be inquisitive. All right. I won't be. But you've rather frightened me. And I'm not used to being frightened. Because, you see, if by any chance Marcus was murdered, and it came out that he was Michael's father—well, it wouldn't be very good for either Michael or me, would it?"

"Yes. I see that, Gale."

Wordsworth spoke slowly. Their conversation had taken an uncomfortable turn, making him feel awkward again, just when he had begun to feel at his ease with her.

"But I shouldn't worry," he went on.

"All right. I won't. Only there's something I'd like you to know. Marcus and I hadn't met—except once at his lawyer's office—since he told me of his engagement to Millicent Palmer. I was only telephoning him to tell him that it was no use his lawyer's going on pestering me, and that I simply wouldn't sign any document."

She broke off; and he thought it better not to answer. She looked at the clock, and rose, smiling, "It's time your bed was made up, William. How many blankets would you like, and what time shall Eliza bring you tea? I have mine at a quarter to seven."

"Then I'll have mine as soon as you've had yours."

"And the blankets?"

"As many as you can spare."

Gale went out, and upstairs. He heard her open a cupboard. After London, with its gunfire and its bombs, this little house seemed so quiet, so peaceful. Yet even here there

was no real peace—and not overmuch safety. She and Michael oughtn't to be here. They should have gone to America.

Thought diffused as Gale and Eliza Bigland came through the doorway. They began to make up the sofa. Gale said over her shoulder, "We're not giving you any sheets. You'll be warmer without them." He wished he had not given up his old habit of carrying spare shaving tackle in the car. He'd look like hell tomorrow morning.

Eliza Bigland said, "That'll do nicely. Good night, Squadron Leader Wordsworth"; and left them alone.

"Would you like a nightcap?" asked Gale. "I usually have one."

She fetched whiskey and a syphon from the dining room. They drank slowly, talking the while. His awkwardness had disappeared. Once more it seemed as though they must have known each other for a longish time. Her lips began to look very tempting. If he didn't keep a tight rein on himself, he would go clean off the deep end about this young woman.

"Good night," said Gale, holding out a hand. "Sleep well, William."

He took the hand, grew conscious of the magnetism between them, and that he was drawing her just a little closer. Their eyes met. He felt every pulse in his body begin to tingle. "Steady on," he told himself; and knew that those golden brown eyes were laughing at him.

"I think not," she said slowly. "In fact I'm sure of it." And abruptly she was gone.

4

He must have been trying to sleep for the best part of two hours. Except for the tick of that clock in the hall, this little house was as quiet as his own bungalow at Cape Remittance—but darker, much darker, because the fire had gone right out and the windows were double-curtained.

What a blasted nuisance this blackout was. One never got enough air.

Wordsworth turned over once more, and closed his eyes again. But it was no use. One just couldn't sleep. One's brain was too busy.

Ashdown had been murdered. But would one ever be able to prove it? And did it matter? Ashdown was no loss. He'd always been a four-letter man. How could any woman have fallen for the fellow? How could Gale have fallen for such a fellow? And why on earth had one fallen so hard for Gale?

"I've certainly done that," he knew. "And I don't look like getting over it. I want that young woman. I want to marry that young woman. I don't believe I shall ever be happy until I have married that young woman."

To which knowledge, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I

WORDSWORTH woke to find a teatray on a little table by the sofa, and Eliza Bigland laying the fire.

"I've managed to borrow a razor for you," she said. "From the people over the road. It's in the cloakroom. Mrs. Johnson's having her bath now. I'll let you know as soon as she's finished. You'll have to use your overcoat for a dressing gown. Breakfast's at a quarter to eight."

He drank his tea and smoked a cigarette while he shaved.

On his way up to the bathroom he met Michael, who said, "Hallo. Did you sleep in your uniform?" By seven-thirty he entered the dining room to see Gale laying the table.

"How did you sleep?" he asked.

"Splendidly. Were you *very* uncomfortable, William?"

"Rather not. What's that gadget?"

"An electric toaster. Haven't you ever seen one? This coffee pot's electric too."

His eggs and bacon—brought by Eliza Bigland—were cooked to a turn. Gale ate cereal.

"I have to be careful of my figure," she said. Otherwise she said very little—another point in her favour. A wife who chattered at breakfast would be the devil. And he was still queerly determined to make her his wife.

Minnie Mouse, stabled with the people who had lent him the razor, needed a couple of turns with the handle before she would consent to start. It was just growing light as they climbed in and Michael waved them goodbye.

"He usually breakfasts with me," said Gale. "But I thought I'd spare you that infliction."

"I like your Michael."

"Do you? I'm glad."

Halfway to London a black Rolls-Bentley driven flat out honked and hared by.

"Wasn't that Izod, Gale?"

"Yes. Frank always drives like that. I tell him he'll have an accident one of these days."

"Do you like him?"

She brooded a moment.

"I'm never quite sure," she said finally. "It's so difficult to judge a man when you know he's in love with you. It's flattering, you see."

"You're not in love with him by any chance?"

She brooded again.

"Would it matter if I were?" she asked.

"It would rather."

"Isn't that slightly ridiculous?"

"It's worse than that, Gale. It's completely idiotic."

"Then let's talk about something else, shall we?"

He dropped her at Bond Street with a final:

"Could we lunch together one day?"

"I don't see any reason why we shouldn't," said Gale.

2

Half an hour after he dropped Gale at Bond Street, Wordsworth was driving off again—this time for a conference with the Security Officer at Fighter Command, from whom he had found an urgent call on his arrival at the Ministry.

He thought as he drove; but, this morning, very few of his thoughts were with his job. On the horizon of his mind shimmered a mirage, which every new emotion urged him to make a reality. Yet every old emotion still preached distrust.

Marriage, however happy, caged a fellow. Must he lock himself behind its bars?

Just before eleven o'clock, he turned in at the gateway on the high road; drove up to the barrier, and showed his yellow pass. The sentry let him through. He parked Minnie Mouse, and made the rest of his way on foot.

The routine conference lasted less than half an hour. Emerging from it, he encountered Prisworthy, who saluted, saying:

"I looked in at the Ministry on my way here. Conington told me I might run into you. I'm just going along to see the Ack-Ack blokes. If you're not in too much of a hurry come with me."

"All right."

They turned left, past stables converted to a garage, towards the camouflaged building which housed Anti-Aircraft Command. Here the khaki of gunners and A.T.S. girls replaced the blue of Waafs and aircraftmen.

"About that shell," began Prisworthy. "Boulte was wrong. It's a three inch, not a three point seven. And I agree with you that the fuze is suspect. But I don't fancy Negresco's going to play."

"Why not?"

Prisworthy's pugface assumed the blank expression of the Englishman who has his own ideas but feels it inadvisable to volunteer information.

"It's a bit difficult to say." He spoke slowly. "Negresco's a funny fellow. He likes sitting on the fence."

In the hall of the building they showed their passes again. Then Prisworthy led up an uncarpeted wooden stairs, and into a room where one officer sat at a desk, and two bent over a large raised model-map of London Area.

"Good God," ejaculated the officer at the desk, who was large and red of face with an upbrushed moustache, "if it isn't our one and only W.W., the terror of all wrongdoers, masquerading as a boy in blue."

"Champagne Charlie—well, I'm blowed," said Wordsworth; and the couple from Cape Remittance clasped hands.

Prisworthy had moved to the model. After a while he interrupted Wordsworth and Major Charlton (otherwise Champagne Charlie) to ask for a scale. Presently he called them over. The other two officers had left the model and were back at their desks.

"Is this up to date, sir?" asked Prisworthy.

"No." Champagne Charlie glanced at a blackboard hung with discs which stood by his desk. "There are several new troops to put in, only we've run out of pins."

"Troops?" queried Wordsworth.

"Just before this adjectival war broke out," explained Charlton, "some blasted idiot decided that four guns were to be called a troop, and that three troops—were to be called a battery. And two batteries are a regiment these days. Regiments of the Royal Regiment. I ask you."

He sniffed. Prisworthy put more questions; was given map references, and continued busy with his scale.

"What the hell are you after?" asked Charlton.

"I'm trying to find out which of your troops—if any—could have landed a three-inch shell in the Air Ministry last Wednesday night."

"Why didn't you say so before? I've had a bloke called Negresco worrying my guts out with the same question. There's only one."

He gave the number of the troop, and pointed it out on the map.

"Funny thing about that crowd," said Charlton. "They're always in some trouble or other. The time before last it was their ammunition return. By the way, Godley"—he turned to one of his officers—"have those missing rounds been accounted for?"

"All but one, sir."

"That's rather a queer coincidence." Prisworthy looked at Wordsworth. "Don't you think so?"

"I certainly do. Would it be possible for me to run down and see that lot, Champagne Charlie?"

"If you'll tell me what you want to see 'em about."

"Well, it's rather hush hush."

"Hush hush, my foot. Come on over to the mess and have a can of beer."

The pair of them, accompanied by Prisworthy, and continuously saluted, walked back to the other building and into the big anteroom, in a remote corner of which three cans of beer soon became nine.

Having been told the outline of the story, Champagne Charlie said, "It all sounds a bit fantastic to me, but if you want a pass, I'll send it on to you—one of our Lord High Muckamucks has to sign 'em nowadays."

"And keep the thing under your hat, please."

"Okay, W.W. Mum's the word."

They left the anteroom full, and the radio droning pompously, "A communiqué from the Air Ministry and the Ministry of Home Security announces that bombs were dropped at an East Coast town early this morning. Anti-aircraft guns went into action and the raider was driven off. An anti-aircraft shell burst near a cinema. There were no casualties except for one errand boy injured in the leg by shrapnel!"

"Injured!" scoffed Champagne Charlie as they sat down to lunch. "As though the poor little sod had been run over by a bus, or caught his finger in a mangle. Why not 'wounded'? And we only fired ten rounds of shrapnel the whole of last month. At Cardiff, I believe. This war looks like being the death of decent English."

"On that point," said Prisworthy, "why do we go on using the word 'communiqué'? What's the matter with 'communication,' or 'announcement'?"

"Not pansy enough for Portland Place?" suggested from across the table a hardbitten man in his middle sixties, who wore the ribbon of a last century campaign in Matabeleland but only the single narrow ring of the pilot officer.

Wordsworth, however, was in no mood for backchat. He

drank a quick cup of coffee in the anteroom; and drove back to Whitehall as furiously as traffic permitted—his mind on his job once more, his imagination overstimulated by what appeared as though it might be so much more than a coincidence if by any chance Flossie's husband, Sergeant Dowdy, were attached to that gunner unit whose ammunition return showed a deficiency of one round.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I

SNOW was falling as Wordsworth drove up Whitehall on that Monday night. It had been no afternoon for concentration, with half a dozen routine matters to be finished off, and both telephones ringing all the time, and Conington hinting darkly that he might have a tale to unfold about "your pal George Ramsay" if only he could "grub something out of the old rag's library."

Meanwhile a chap must eat; and one's club, somehow or other, seemed unlikely to tempt one's appetite.

"Do myself really well for once," decided Wordsworth, and drove to his own flat, where he took a second bath, had another shave, and changed—against regulations—into plain clothes.

The entertainment column of the evening paper informed him that he could dine in complete safety at one of his old haunts, the Hotel Fantastic. There, in the underground grill room, a known waiter welcomed him with a stiff martini and a French menu as long as his arm.

"You're a bit early, sir," explained his waiter, when Wordsworth commented on the emptiness of the long over-decorated room.

He chose his food with some care, and devoted more to the wine list, finally deciding on an expensive hock. Just as he finished his smoked salmon—with many of the tables already full—he looked up to see George Ramsay, and Millicent Ashdown who flashed him a slightly condescending smile.

Again, the pair wore evening dress. They sat down some

way from him, but with both their faces clearly in view. Some minutes later appeared Izod, tall in his light blue R.A.F. uniform; Boulte, in the dark blue patrol jacket of a gunner's wartime evening kit; and a brace of slightly foreign-looking girls.

The quartette took one of the most distant tables. Wordsworth imagined they had not spotted him. But, almost immediately, Izod came over to ask:

"If you're all alone, won't you join us?"

This offer refused, he went on:

"I'm not too keen on changing tables in the middle of a meal myself. But I insist on your coming over to us for coffee and a liqueur."

"Why?" wondered Wordsworth, alone again. But momentarily his turtle soup, his woodcock *fumet*, and the savoury which followed, proved wonders enough. It needed only Gale to share the last of this Deidesheimer Spätlese for one to dismiss Ashdown's murder as the merest triviality.

Millicent Ashdown's note, however, almost made him forget Gale.

The note, handed to him by a waiter, read, "Do please come over when you've finished. There's something I particularly want to ask you." As he looked across after deciphering the almost illegible signature, she flashed him a less condescending smile, and lifted a hand for invitation.

He emptied his wineglass, and went over at once.

George Ramsay welcomed him, or so it seemed, a shade too effusively. A waiter brought up a chair, and more coffee.

"How about an Upmann Corona?" asked Ramsay. "And a *fine maison*? Poor Carlo—he used to be *chef de restaurant* here—I'd have let him off internment just for his taste in Havanas and brandy. But I couldn't make the Home Office see it that way; and he was drowned, if you remember, in the *Arandora Star*."

The brandy was a double; and Wordsworth, taking his first sip, felt the woman's eyes on him over the rim of the big glass. Habit warned him to be careful, to keep a guard on his

own tongue. She talked Mayfair platitudes while he clipped and lit his cigar. Then, lowering her voice almost to a whisper, and leaning forward so that her scent conflicted with his second puff of tobacco, she said:

"George tells me that you're really a policeman, and that you're not at all sure that my husband's death was quite natural. Is that correct?"

"Well—" began Wordsworth, now feeling the need for extreme caution. But already Ramsay was interrupting:

"That's hardly fair, Millicent. So far his suspicions are . . . only suspicions."

A pause followed. Ramsay and the woman were eyeing each other—the woman's eyes steadier than the man's. One of Ramsay's big ears moved.

"Have it your own way, my dear," he said suddenly. "I've done my best to dissuade you."

Millicent Ashdown lifted her tiny glass of white liqueur, just touched it with her red lips, and set it down again. Once more her dark eyes sought Wordsworth's—and he grew conscious of their full attraction. She seemed to be appraising him almost as though he were a potential lover.

"What I wanted to ask you," she said, still almost in a whisper, "is whether you know of the quarrel between my husband and"—abruptly her eyes stared straight past him and clean across the restaurant—"that absurd person, Major Boulte?"

2

Back at his own table some ten minutes later Wordsworth reconstructed the little scene which had followed Millicent Ashdown's question.

He remembered himself saying, a little too frankly perhaps, "I heard some rumour that they didn't quite see eye to eye, but this is the first I've heard of an actual quarrel"; and the woman's dark eyes coming back to his, and one of her white hands smoothing the silver streak in her blue-black

hair, and one of Ramsay's ears moving as he said, "Women are always apt to exaggerate"; and the woman's quiet:

"You know perfectly well I'm not exaggerating, George. You know as well as I do that Boulte threatened to shoot Marcus."

"Only according to Marcus, who would have put him under close arrest immediately if it were true."

The ensuing silence—it seemed to Wordsworth, still busy on his reconstruction—had been pregnant with emotional storm. Millicent Ashdown was biting her lips as though to check some furious retort; the pupils of Ramsay's gray-green eyes dilated and contracted. He remembered breaking in:

"When did this quarrel happen, Mrs. Ashdown?"

"Some time ago."

"Do you know the cause of it?"

"Not precisely."

At which exact point in his meditations Wordsworth—who had a peculiar horror of such personal contacts—felt a hand on his shoulder.

"*Sieg Heil, lieber Oberstleutnant*, to say nothing of *Viva il Duce, caro Colonnello*, our ladies await your coming with impatience," quoth Anthony Boulte.

The man was obviously half-seas over. It seemed best to follow him. The word "*oberstleutnant*" defeated Wordsworth, but "*colonnello*" sounded plain enough. So Boulte had been making inquiries about one, had he? Slightly suspicious, that.

Izod, completely sober, rose as they approached. He introduced Wordsworth to the two girls, whose surnames proved rather baffling. At close quarters, they were an intriguing couple, possibly sisters, dark of hair, slightly sallow of complexion, with slumbrous slanting eyes. Both spoke English extremely well.

On the table stood a bottle of port. Boulte poured a fifth glass.

"We observed you in society," he sneered. "This is just a

democratic party," And he added three words in an unfamiliar tongue, at which both girls smiled.

"We are Czechs," explained one of them. "The major speaks our language. We think it very wonderful of him."

"I think *you're* wonderful, Irma," said Boulte.

He took a pinch of snuff.

"But not as wonderful as Sir George Ramsay," he went on. "Because he got away with murder."

Izod said, "For God's sake shut up, Tony."

"*Scheibenkleister* to you," fumed Boulte.

The girl who had last spoken winced. Boulte controlled himself, spoke some more words, which sounded apologetic, in that unfamiliar tongue. The other girl glanced at her wristwatch, and remarked, "We shall have to be going soon. I do hope the aeroplanes keep away tonight."

Wordsworth saw Izod signal to a waiter, and heard him say, "My bill, please. As soon as you can."

Meanwhile Boulte's manner had changed to overaffability. He put a hand on Wordsworth's arm (confound the man, couldn't he feel one's hatred of being touched!), and beamed, "Never take any notice of what I say when I've had a couple. Have another port? Let's all go on to a night club."

"You know we can't do that," interrupted Izod. "These girls have to be home by half past twelve."

"All right. Have it your own way, Frank. Only"—the waiter had brought their bill—"this is my party. You paid last time."

Boulte drew a leather case from his hip pocket, picked out three five-pound notes and dropped them on the plate. Izod scrutinised the bill; and gave him back one of the notes. The waiter returned with the change.

"Keep it," said Boulte. "Cheerio, Wordsworth. I was a kind of a policeman myself once."

The two girls were already on their feet. They offered their hands; said good night, and went off together. Boulte followed them. Izod stayed.

"I'm sorry about this," he began. "Tony doesn't often get

tight. But he's been under rather a strain. You won't take too much notice of what he said, will you?"

"Oh, that'll be all right," replied Wordsworth, not wishing to commit himself.

"Why did Izod say, 'Too much?' " he meditated, making his way back to his own table and calling for his own bill.

3

Snow was still falling, and London curiously quiet, as Wordsworth walked the few yards from his garage to his home. That last glass of port had made his legs feel just a little unsteady; but once in his armchair by the fire his brain began to work overtime.

Why had Millicent Ashdown tried to throw suspicion on Boulte? Possibly to keep it off George Ramsay. Why had Boulte tried to throw suspicion on George Ramsay? Possibly to keep it off himself. And what about the Dowdys? What about Izod's, "Too much?"

"I'll get to the bottom of this somehow or other," he decided—only to remember Gale's, "If it came out that he were Michael's father—well, it wouldn't be very good for either Michael or me, would it?"

And, sleeping, he dreamed of Gale passive in his arms.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I

"I DON'T wonder you're staggered to see me at this hour in the morning, W.W.," drawled Guy Conington. "I'm a bit staggered at being up and fed so early myself."

He seated himself at the breakfast table, and lit a cigarette.

"My fourth already," he confessed. "And I didn't get to bed till three. Sleuthing for you."

"With what result?"

"The solution of the mystery. I have it here."

He threw some sheets of typescript across the table. Wordsworth finished his toast and marmalade before he picked them up.

"Once the little murderer, always the little murderer," pronounced Conington. "Read, mark, learn and arrest."

Wordsworth read slowly. The typescript was headed, "Notes extracted from our Paris edition, dated Sunday, July 20, 1917." Followed a caption, "British Officer Alleged To Have Shot Wife's Lover Taken Into Custody By Paris Police," and Conington's précis, "Captain G. Leatham, Royal Flying Corps, arrested in sitting room of Hotel Meurice. Smoking revolver in hand. On floor, body of middle-aged man. L. tells police, 'I warned him to leave my wife alone. He refused. I saw red, and I shot him.'"

The next page and a half contained a précis of the trial, of a French advocate's speech for the defence ("Consider my client—a gallant airman, only just released from hospital, with his face still swathed in bandages") and the verdict of acquittal.

On the last page, under another caption, dated ten years later than the first, "Fortune For Scientist But He Must Change His Name," Wordsworth read:

"The estate of Mr. Roderick Ramsay, the well-known Huddersfield manufacturer, has been proved at £750,000. After various bequests to charity the residue is left to the deceased's nephew, Mr. George Leatham, on condition that he takes the name of the testator."

A final note stated, "G.R. knighted for contributions to science in birthday honours, 1939."

"So there we are," said Conington, as Wordsworth laid down the typescript. "Whudunit? Hedunit."

"And the proof?"

"Psychologically——"

"Psychologically isn't logically."

"Epigrams. And the man hasn't even drawn his blackout curtains yet."

"The trouble with you journalists, Guy, is that you will jump at your conclusions."

All the same, re-reading that typescript and listening to Conington's verbal elaboration, Wordsworth felt rather impressed. The sex passion was a strong motive. A man who had once killed for love might do it again.

"What happened to the wife?" he asked.

"According to *Who's Who* she died in nineteen twenty-one. Oh—and one other point. You remember my telling you that Ramsay used to run around with some wench or other. Well—the wench was Millicent Palmer. I grubbed that out from my own column."

"You certainly make out a case as far as motive is concerned, Guy. And there could have been opportunity, too."

They discussed the matter for another ten minutes. Then Conington said, "In case you've forgotten, it's my day off"; and Wordsworth, "Hence the early visit."

Drawn curtains revealed melting snow. Driving to the Ministry, Wordsworth decided, "I suppose I ought to have a talk with Langfordson."

But Leslie Longshanks—a lady secretary in Quaritch's office informed him—was at the conference, and Quaritch himself still on leave.

2

Before he went to his own office, sheer habit drew the ex-police chief of Cape Remittance to the scene of what he now felt positive had been a crime.

Room Twenty Eight was under repair. He made his way between plasterers' ladders to the window, in which two men were just fitting a new frame; and peered out. An iron stairway ran within three feet of the window down to the courtyard below.

Leaving the room he encountered a tubby little man in messenger's uniform who inquired:

"Are you looking for anybody, sir?"

"No. What's your name?"

"Pink."

The name seemed so extraordinarily appropriate—for the man's round clean-shaven face was pink all over and his hands matched it—that Wordsworth couldn't help smiling.

"I thought Dowdy was on duty in this lobby," he went on.

"Dowdy and I share duties. He's away today. It was bad luck about the air vice-marshal, wasn't it, sir?"

"Very bad luck indeed."

"Was you the duty officer that night, sir?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. From what Dowdy said."

Pink showed an inclination to gossip. Wordsworth let him rattle on for a sentence or so before asking the pertinent questions. The information Pink gave confirmed Dowdy's. Room Twenty Eight had been kept locked.

"And the window? Was that kept shut?"

"The air vice-marshal, he wasn't one for fresh air, sir. He always had it bolted."

This tallied with one of Wordsworth's previous-war mem-

ories. He could actually hear Ashdown saying, "You young subalterns appear to revel in draughts. No wonder you're always snivelling." He left Pink, and took the electric lift to his own floor.

There were five envelopes—four of them foolscap size and one, smaller, marked "Secret and Immediate"—on his desk. The smaller envelope contained two others. Champagne Charlie had lost no time in sending him that pass.

"You won't find the gun position too easily," read Champagne Charlie's private note. "But if you happen to know a chap called Boulte—he's in the Ministry too—he'll tell you how to get there. I should go right away if I were you, because they're liable to be moved any moment."

The foolscap envelopes contained only routine stuff. He tossed the various papers into his In tray; looked up the number of Boulte's room in the yellow telephone directory, and went along, stopping outside the door, which stood just ajar at the sound of Izod's voice.

"*Dummkopf*," Izod was saying. "*Besoffener Dummkopf Kannst nie das Blatt vor'm Munde halten?*"

The last four words, though unintelligible, registered. Wordsworth memorised them, and Boulte's repetition of the word for which he had seemingly apologised at the *Fantastic Scheibenkleister*.

Then he went in.

Boulte, capped and with his cane under his arm, stood by a huge map, studded with varicoloured pins, along the top of which ran the blue-chalked lettering, "Hunland Flak." Izod sat at a desk. Both turned to the door as Wordsworth entered.

"Flak Department at your service, sir," said Boulte, clicking his heels and mock-saluting. "You want the best anti-aircraft intelligence, we have it. All inquiries treated with courtesy and dispatch."

Izod contented himself with, "Good morning, Wordsworth." He indicated a chair, and proffered a flat box of fifty cigarettes.

"Tony and I were just having our morning hate," he con-

tinued, clicking on his lighter. "As a matter of fact I was just ticking him off for his behaviour yesterday evening."

The tone was as smooth as ever, and the hand that held the lighter quite steady; but somehow Wordsworth sensed apprehension.

"One of Frank's troubles," said Boulte, seating himself, still capped, at his own desk, "is that he was at Winchester. Manners makyth man'—and all that bilge. I was as tight as a drum last night. All right. I admit it. *Wer niemals einen Rausch gehabt*—Sorry. I forgot you didn't talk Hun."

He took out his monocle; polished it on a silk handkerchief; put it back again, and felt for his snuffbox.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" asked Izod; and again—or so it seemed—one sensed apprehension behind the smooth tones.

"Yes. I have to go out to a gun position, and Charlton says Boulte knows the best way."

He showed Izod Champagne Charlie's letter. Izod passed it over to Boulte, who said, "When do you want to go? I'll tool you down there if you like. Only I can't manage it before tomorrow."

"I'm afraid"—the get-out appeared singularly fortunate—"that I must go this afternoon."

Boulte took a pinch of snuff, and fumbled in the middle drawer of his desk. From this he produced a map of London, over which they were soon bending.

"You'd better take it with you," he said, pinpointing both the gun position and battery headquarters. "Only let me have it back."

Just before Wordsworth left the room, Izod remarked, "I hear you were down in my part of the world on Sunday. If you're along that way again, get Gale to bring you over to my place. She's such a charming person, I think."

His apprehension seemed to have disappeared.

3

Lunching early and alone, Wordsworth again experienced

that jealousy of Frank Izod. After which he fell to resenting the trammels of his present employment and comparing it with the freedom of action he had previously enjoyed.

Actually, he had no right to leave the office with Guy away. Factually, he had no right to be conducting this investigation at all. If Daddy Dorland hadn't gone sick, if Quaritch weren't on leave, if Langfordson weren't so infernally uninterested . . . And anyway Ashdown's treatment of Gale proved him only fit to be murdered.

Rather significant, too confoundedly significant, that last thought.

Another thought, so vague that it scarcely penetrated at the time, struck Wordsworth while he drank his coffee; but recurred insistently as he drove along Millbank.

"Impossible," he told himself. "Too melodramatic."

It proved equally impossible, nevertheless, to banish that thought completely from his mind.

One of the streets which Boulte had told him to take was blocked with the debris of a house, pioneers busy among the ruins. Taking the diversion, he lost his way, and had to consult his map. Another delay followed. Two o'clock struck from a nearby church tower as he drove up to battery headquarters—a sand-bagged school facing a small triangular green.

The sentry in khaki saluted, and called for a corporal, who inspected Wordsworth's pass, and conducted him across the asphalted playground into a schoolroom on whose walls still hung a large photograph of Saint Mark's, Venice, and the reproduction of a picture by Marcus Stone.

"Charlton informed me that you would probably be here this afternoon," said a lanky lantern-jawed major of the Royal Artillery, with graying hair, who wore two ribbons of the previous war. "My name's Pullen. I gather you want to visit one of my gun positions."

"That's right. Sorry if I'm making a nuisance of myself."

"On the contrary. We always appreciate visitors from the R.A.F."

Pullen rose from the table at which he had been seated, and shook hands. They swapped previous-war reminiscences for a minute or so. Then the battery commander asked:

"Is there anything particular you want to know before I take you over?"

"There is one thing." Wordsworth spoke slowly. "Do you happen to have a sergeant called Dowdy in your crowd?"

"Oh, yes. He's one of my best number ones. Dowdy has been with me more than two years. We're Territorials, you know."

Further questions were stopped by a man running in to announce, "Air raid warning red, sir," and the banshee wail of the alert.

"Let's go along to the guns rightaway," said Pullen. "You may get a chance of seeing them in action."

He ran out, calling for his car, which was open. They jumped in; were driven half a mile, through mean streets under a steel-gray sky, to another green, larger than the one in front of the schoolhouse, square and fenced with barbed wire.

As they walked quickly across this green, Wordsworth saw the muzzles of the guns elevating and traversing. At the sand-bagged command post men in steel helmets peered into the telescopes of the long tube of the heightfinder, the squat box of the predictor. A telephonist called a bearing. Heightfinder and predictor traversed simultaneously. Very far away, they heard the first drone of an invisible aircraft. Nearer, a black cable played the Indian rope trick to an invisible balloon.

Puzzled, he said to Pullen, "But you'll never see him unless he comes down to a thousand, and if he does that he'll hit the balloon cable."

Pullen smiled. So did one of the men. So did the young gun position officer.

"We are using—" began Pullen; and stopped.

The drone of the aircraft grew louder. More puzzled than

ever, Wordsworth heard a range given, then another range, and the order, "Fire!"

Four guns, speaking almost simultaneously, nearly deafened him. Fingers at ears, he saw the muzzles belch another salvo.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I

THE guns had stopped five minutes ago; but they and the command post were still fully manned.

"Splendid work, Timothy," Pullen was saying to the gun position officer. "This is Squadron Leader Wordsworth. As soon as you get the all clear he would like to have a chat with you. Is Dowdy on duty this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir."

Pullen completed the introduction. Timothy Brendon saluted. He was a likeable professional-looking youngster, clean-shaved, keen of face and eye.

Pullen took him outside the sandbagged post. Wordsworth inspected the green with more care. That multi-funnelled gadget some fifty yards away was obviously a new type of sound locator. That little bit housed a searchlight.

"But what's that thingumibob over there?" he asked the returning Pullen, who smiled again, and confessed, "As I have just been warning Timothy, that is the one thing about which he must not tell you. I am sorry. But those are my orders."

Presently Pullen excused himself; promised to send the car back, and was driven to his headquarters.

"He's a grand fellow," enthused Brendon. "This war must be costing him a perfect packet. You realise who he is, of course."

"No. I'm afraid I don't."

"The youngest K.C. at the bar. I'm in his chambers, or rather I used to be."

A sergeant called, "We've just got the yellow, sir."

"Good. We ought to have the white pretty soon."

Less than a minute later the sergeant called, "White's just come through, sir"; and almost simultaneously sirens sounded the all clear.

"How about a cup of tea?" asked Brendon. "Then I'll get hold of Dowdy for you."

Another young officer appeared. Wordsworth and Brendon left the command post, and made their way towards a hut under trees. A gunner in his shirt sleeves brought tea to a wooden-walled cubicle some eight feet by eight.

"This is alleged to be my orderly room," smiled Brendon. "Disorderly room would be more appropriate. I don't mind the shooting, even when it keeps me up all night. But how I loathe the book work. My clerk went sick about a month ago. He's a chartered accountant in private life. It wasn't so bad before then. But since——"

Continuing to grumble, he mentioned "ammunition returns." Wordsworth took the opportunity to say:

"I happened to hear something about that when I was at A.A. Command. Weren't you a round short?"

"I was. And I am. And they're making as much fuss about it as though I'd stolen the thing."

"Could anyone have stolen it?"

"Have you any particular reason for asking me that?"

Brendon's whole voice, its very modulations, altered with his last question. Imaginatively Wordsworth saw himself in the witness box, under cross-examination.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I have."

"Can you give me your reason?" asked Brendon.

"I'd much rather not."

The lawyer in the gunner's uniform appraised the policeman in the R.A.F. uniform for ten careful seconds, at the end of which he said:

"There isn't a scrap of evidence—and I've been into the matter pretty carefully—in support of your supposition. But I shouldn't care to commit myself that it's impossible."

"We'll have to leave it at that, then."

"Yes. I'm afraid so. Is there anything else I can tell you?"

"There is just one thing. Presumably you keep separate returns for each gun?"

"We do now. Since there's been all this fuss. Pullen insisted. But if you're asking me to tell you which gun was short of that one particular round, I can't. In fact I wouldn't even like to swear that we are a round short. There may have been a miscount in the deliveries. Would you like to see Dowdy now?"

"Please. And, as it's on a private matter, I'd rather like to see him alone."

2

Except for the straggly moustache, Sergeant Edward Dowdy resembled his father rather than the photograph of him which Wordsworth had seen in Flossie's flat. He had the same hazel eyes, only clearer, the same cut of the shoulders, the same powerful hands.

Brendon had left them alone in his "alleged orderly room." Wordsworth told the man he might sit down, and offered him a cigarette.

"Thank you, sir," said Flossie's husband. "But I don't smoke."

This interview was going to be difficult. Wordsworth lit up, and meditated his approach.

"I want to talk to you as one man to another," he began. "I met your wife the other night. And by a curious coincidence I was able to help her mother when she was wounded. I also know your father."

"You'd be at the Air Ministry then?"

"Yes."

An awkward pause followed.

"Have you heard from your father lately?" asked Wordsworth.

Dowdy seemed to hesitate, his lips half opening to disclose square teeth.

"I saw him Saturday night, sir," he said finally. "The captain gave me twenty-four hours' leave."

"You don't get much leave, I imagine."

"First I've had in six months, sir—except for a few hours off of a daytime."

"Did your father tell you what happened on Wednesday night?"

"He told me Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown had been killed by a shell, sir."

"I can tell you something more about that, Dowdy. It's possible that the shell was fired by your own troop."

"If that's so it's God's judgment on him," began Dowdy—and stopped dead, brown lashes flickering, lower teeth biting up at the loose hairs of his moustache.

It seemed to Wordsworth the moment for brutality.

"I gather," he said, "that you knew about the relations between the air vice-marshal and your wife."

Edward Dowdy averted his eyes. He looked over his shoulder—almost as though he were meditating escape.

"What if I did?" he asked suddenly. "And how did you find out?"

"Your wife told me."

"The devil she did." One of the powerful hands clenched. "Why? And when?"

Wordsworth did not answer. The hazel eyes were steady now, and glinting fierily. One had seen the same glint in another pair of eyes, and jerked out one's pistol just in time.

The fire in Dowdy's eyes died away. Obviously, he was making a great effort to master his temper. "Family temper," Wordsworth told himself.

"I'm sorry, sir," the man muttered finally.

"That's quite all right, Dowdy. I'm sorry too. As a matter of fact your wife volunteered the information. I don't think there's much more I need bother you with. Oh, yes, there is just one thing. What used you to do with yourself before you took up soldiering?"

"I'm a chemist by profession, sir."

"Really. An analytical chemist?"

"No, sir." For the first time Dowdy relaxed. "I worked in a chemist's job. I'd passed all my exams though."

"And where was the shop?"

"Tapworth, sir. That's how I came to meet my wife."

There was nothing to be gained—Wordsworth decided—by further questions. For a few minutes he turned talk to the war, learning that Dowdy had been in France from the outbreak till Dunkirk, which hadn't been too "pleasant." "But we were lucky. We had very few casualties."

And most of that time, Flossie herself bore witness, she had been carrying on with Ashdown. What hell marriage could be!

3

It seemed preposterous to link thoughts of Gale with thoughts of Flossie, or to let the result of Dowdy's marriage affect contemplation of one's own. But Wordsworth's bias against matrimony had become too ingrained to lose all influence on his subconscious processes. Moreover there was a link—Ashdown—between Flossie and Gale.

He caught himself resenting this—and not altogether subconsciously—as he was driven back to battery headquarters, where he found a little note from Pullen regretting that he had been called away to his other troop.

Four o'clock struck by the time Minnie Mouse beetled away from the triangular green. In Whitehall, the overcautious had already drawn their blackout curtains. A fine rain fell haphazard through half a gale from the southwest.

"Looks like a dirty night, sir," said the liftman who took Wordsworth upstairs.

No lights burned in his own office, where the green telephone was ringing frantically. Running to it, he heard a petulant voice:

"Wing Commander Staveleigh here. Is that A.I. twenty-seven b? I've been trying to get you ever since three o'clock. Can you tell me——"

Wordsworth told him; and recradled the instrument. The question had been as futile as most of Staveleigh's. One was really getting too old to be sugared about by boys barely thirty who had never seen a shot fired, however many rings they wore. Blast this office work. One was only a clerk in a fighting man's uniform. One would have been happier in a battery. If only one were still young enough to fly!

He clicked on the lights, and drew the curtains. The black telephone rang. Someone asked, "Can I speak to Group Captain Dorland?"

"You're on the wrong number. And anyway he's away sick."

"Queer, how bloody-minded I'm feeling," brooded Wordsworth, unlocking his metal cupboard and taking out both trays.

He worked for a quarter of an hour. A messenger brought envelopes, and reminded him that he owed a shilling for "tea money." He paid, and examined the envelopes, distastefully, thinking, "More bumph. If minutes could win this war, the Boche would have been on the run long ago."

The contents of the first two envelopes only made him laugh; but the letter he drew from the third one evoked another curse.

Nobody with such a handwriting should be allowed to use a pen. And this was actually written in green pencil. He turned the sheet over, and applied a magnifying glass to the signature, finally deciding it must be "Artemus Atkinson," though all one could decipher was "Ar—" "At——."

Prolonged scrutiny revealed the gist of the communication, which evoked more curses. Eventually he managed to decode:

"Dear Wordsworth, Negresco has just been in to see" (damn it, that must be "see") "me about the matter we entrusted to him for investigation. He is afraid, and I thoroughly agree with him, that the fragment" (query—"segment") "of the fuze with which you supplied us is not of sufficient size for us to be able to seduce" (no—"deduce")

"anything definite. That the shell was of the standard three inch" (the next word couldn't possibly be "thunderbolt"—no—got it!) "twenty hundredweight pattern seems obvious. But that's as far as we can possibly go. I have told Negresco that he had better coagulate" (no, "circulate") "a minute to this effect to all members of the conference, but thought I would let you know at once as you are the most interested party."

A postscript which might conceivably mean, "Come in and see me if you happen to be passing," concluded the sea-green atrocity.

Momentarily beyond oaths, even in the barbarous dialect affected by his native policemen at Cape Remittance, Wordsworth locked up and went home.

4

That Tuesday night his bachelor flat seemed particularly cosy. Wordsworth decided, though the food was always rather horrible, to dine there. Afterwards he settled down, in bedroom slippers and an old shooting jacket, to a cheroot and a well-thumbed volume of Kipling's verse.

"Better than marriage," he decided. But almost immediately, he began to think of Gale; and soon he found himself reaching for the telephone, asking for Tapworth thirty-three.

Gale was saying, "Hallo. Is that you, William? Somehow I thought you might ring up tonight," in less than two minutes. At the end of three more they were still talking.

"By the way," he asked, "how is Mrs. Smart getting on?"

"Oh, she's fine. Mrs. Egmont says she's already off the danger list."

"Thanks to you. When are we having that lunch?"

"I'm terribly busy all this week. One of our girls is away."

"How about Saturday?"

"Yes. I could manage Saturday. Where shall we go?"

"The ladies' room at my club isn't too bad."

They talked for another minute. Then, after a little silence, Gale said:

"You sound rather depressed, William."

"As a matter of fact, I am feeling a bit fed up tonight."

"For any particular reason?"

"No. Just generally."

"I expect it's the weather. We're inches deep in snow down here, and the wind's nearly blowing the roof off."

Three pips indicated they had been talking for another three minutes.

"You mustn't be extravagant," said Gale. "See you Saturday."

The wire went silent. His cheroot had gone out. He threw it away; lit another, and returned to his verse.

"A woman is only a woman," he read. But tonight that crude philosophy had no appeal.

Still hearing Gale's voice, his imagination began to picture her—the curves of her soft cheeks, her hands, the way the auburn hair swept back from her forehead. Was this love—or just sex?

"Sex, I suppose," he thought bitterly. "Damn it, I've only seen her twice. We haven't known each other a week yet. It's no good letting yourself go too barmy."

And after considerable effort he exorcised the picture, wrenching his mind back to the problem of Ashdown's death.

The professor's letter rather put the tin hat on further investigation. Did it, though? Experts were always a pest. Find a technical witness for the prosecution—and the other side would find two for the defence. Besides, the professor—sheltering behind Negresco—had merely refused to commit himself. He was a friend of George Ramsay's too. And so far Ramsay seemed the chief suspect.

Psychologically—as Conington said—Ramsay's past counted against him. He had motive, and opportunity (easy enough to plant that phony shell before he gave up Room Twenty Eight) and the requisite scientific knowledge.

What about the Dowdys, though? Just as much motive

there. Bad-tempered chaps, both of them. And Edward Dowdy was a trained chemist as well as a trained gunner. Supposing he'd got away with that missing round, substituted another fuze, handed the shell over to his father. After all, anyone could have a key copied or unlatch a window with a pen-knife.

Item—damn it, the fellow was just asking to be a suspect—what about Boulte, and his faithful Izod?

The mere recollection of Izod, however, brought back the picture of Gale.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I

GUY CONINGTON, as usual without helmet or gasmask, lounged in; hung up his cap and coat; tore Tuesday's leaf from the calendar; sat down at his desk, and lit his first cigarette of the day.

W.W. was not in the room; but the open cupboard showed he must have arrived.

"Nice bloke," mused Conington. "But obstinate. He's a bit too much the man of the wide open spaces for this joint. What we need are bigger and better yes-men. Why the hell did I give up two thousand a year and expenses for a few lousy hundreds? Went all patriotic, I suppose. Gosh, I haven't half got a hangover. Nice girl, Dolly, but a bit heavy on the alcohol. Funny, sitting next to our Miss King at the movies. She must have been having her day off too. Why was she all alone? Why wasn't I? Good-looking wench, our Elsie King. More my cup of tea than Dolly. Might even be a teetotaller."

Still, Dolly had her points—and her curves, too.

He looked up as Wordsworth entered the room; rose, and attempted to click his heels, saying:

"Good morning, sir. I trust I see you well. The wonder is I'm not seeing you double."

"So you've been on the tiles again, Guy?"

"What else is there to do with oneself these nights?"

"You might get married."

"What—again?"

They chaffed on for a sentence or so. Then Conington asked, "By the way, how's murder? When are you going to

arrest George Ramsay? That won't half make a sensation—paper shortage or no paper shortage."

"Arrest my elbow! Take a squint at this."

Wordsworth picked Atkinson's letter from the tray and passed it over. Conington deciphered the gist of it, and dropped banter.

"You'll have to chuck your hand in, W.W.," he said.

"Why?"

The messenger entered with an envelope, and went out again.

"Why?" repeated Wordsworth.

"Because you'll only kick up a stink if you don't. You're not in Cape Remittance, you know."

"Don't I wish I were. This place gets my goat. I nearly had another row with that pipsqueak, Staveleigh, yesterday evening. Daddy Dorland's still sick. I've just been over to his office. Langfordson's in conference as usual. And Quaritch is still on leave."

"Do you intend to consult Quaritch?"

"I can't call in Scotland Yard on my own, can I?"

"Obstinate as a mule," thought Conington. Aloud he asked, "You don't take this letter from Atkinson as final then?"

"No, I don't. And I don't believe Prисworthy will, either. He ought to be here any minute now. By the way, did you ever discover what squadron young Patterson was in."

"Patterson?"

"Yes. Boulte's half brother."

"I'm afraid I forgot about that. But I can easily find out. They'll know in the War Room."

"And you might find out, at the same time, what group the squadron was in, and who the group commander was."

"Okay, W.W. I'll go down now."

Alone, Wordsworth took the little book with his notes on the case—to which he had added one or two the previous

evening—from the inside pocket of his jacket, and was still studying it when the messenger announced "Captain Prисworthy."

"I told you," said Prисworthy without any preamble, "that Negresco wasn't going to play. You've seen his minute, I suppose?"

"No. It hasn't filtered through our registry yet. But I've had a letter from Atkinson."

Prисworthy produced Negresco's minute.

"He and Atkinson are as much use as a pair of sick headaches," he said, his pug face wrinkling in disgust. "They can sit on the fence till all's blue—but they'll never convince me that a three-inch shell bursting on impact in a confined space would only blow a window frame out, burst open a door and bring down a few bits of plaster."

"Good morning, everybody," interrupted the harsh voice of Anthony Boulte.

Boulte had entered, as usual, noiselessly. Wordsworth gathered, from the cap, the cane, and the British Warm coat with the fur collar, that he had only just arrived at the Ministry.

He said, a little tersely, "Morning, Boulte." Prисworthy said, "Good morning, sir. Have you had Major Negresco's minute yet?"

"No. But I've heard about it. Let's see what he says."

Prисworthy—to Wordsworth's annoyance, though he realised that a captain could not refuse a major's request—handed over the sheet of blue foolscap. Boulte perched himself on the desk. His monocled eye scrutinised the various paragraphs. Wordsworth watched him carefully, opining, "I bet he plays a good game of poker."

This opinion strengthened when Boulte said:

"I've always maintained Negresco wasn't a halfwit. This proves he's a quarterwit. I hope you both agree."

He looked at Prисworthy, who nodded.

"And you, Wordsworth?"

The black telephone rang. Answering it, Wordsworth

thought, "If Boulte's the murderer, he's insane." Putting the instrument back after a minute's conversation, he prevaricated:

"I'm trying to keep an open mind. I don't pretend to be an anti-aircraft expert."

Boulte grinned, and began to read the minute aloud.

"A magnificent example," he sneered when he had done, "of the art of avoiding responsibility. Negresco should have been a civil servant. Mark his conclusion. In plain English it means, 'Your ideas may be right, or they may be wrong. But either way I'm right, because I have neither plumped for you nor against you. On the one hand the shell may have been phony. On the other hand it may have been genuine. You don't have to pay any money, but you can make your own ruddy choice.'"

He took a pinch of snuff, and again looked at Prisworthy.

"What's your ruddy choice?" he asked.

"Phony," said Prisworthy.

"Implying that our noble air vice-marshal did not die a hero's death at the post of duty, but was jolly well given the works, bumped off, and or liquidated by someone who hated his guts."

The sheer violence of those words made Prisworthy blink. The utter loathing they implied seemed to confirm Wordsworth's impression of Boulte's insanity. Neither man spoke. Boulte's monocle flashed from one to the other.

"As an anti-aircraft expert," he said finally, "and the only one in this adjectival Ministry, I've given you both my opinion. The rest's up to you, Wordsworth. *Salaam do.*"

He stalked out of the room, closing the door softly behind him. Prisworthy, his discomfort obvious, said:

"I really must get back to the War House. Would you like me to leave Negresco's minute with you?"

"Don't bother to do that. You may want it yourself. My copy'll be coming along all right."

"You realise that *we* can't do any more?"

"Quite, my dear fellow."

"Then I'll be off."

Prisworthy put on his cap, picked up his cane, saluted and departed. The green telephone rang.

"Wordsworth? Good. Langfordson here. I tried to get you after lunch yesterday. Apparently you were out. Could you come along for a moment? I'm working in my own room this morning."

He gave the number of his room. Wordsworth said, "Very good, sir."

How much should one tell Langfordson? Better wait and hear what he had to say.

3

Leslie Langfordson's room was dark; and the linoleum surround of the handsome carpet to which his group captaincy entitled him, dusty. He rose from his desk on Wordsworth's entrance; offered his cigarette case, and indicated a green leather armchair.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he began. "But you seem to have forgotten that report I asked you to let me have."

"I haven't forgotten, sir. I've been up to see you several times."

"But all I want is a report in writing." Langfordson's tone was slightly petulant. "Just a few lines will do. The time of the death. What action you took. That sort of thing. It was an accident, of course."

"Well, it might have been an accident."

Just as Wordsworth spoke, he heard the time bomb burst, and judged it a good half mile away. But Langfordson started up from his chair, and only seemed to ram his long body back on to it with a great effort.

"Blast those things," he said, the pale lashes fluttering over his pale eyes. "I don't quite understand. What do you mean by 'It might have been an accident'?"

The voice, now, was more than slightly petulant. Wordsworth sensed hostility, and the difference between their two

generations, between the flying man of the last war and the air-staff officer, who had never had a Fokker on his tail, of the present one. Subconsciously he must have been aware of this difference ever since he had rejoined. Now, for the first time, the awareness was conscious. Langfordson didn't speak his language, nor he Langfordson's. Some instinct warned him to go gently, to use all his tact.

"I don't want to commit myself further than that, sir," he said suavely. "The chances are I'm quite wrong. Professor Atkinson seems to think so. I had a letter from him last night."

"Professor Atkinson? The armament expert?"

"Yes, sir. One of his officers, Major Negresco, is confirming the letter in an official minute."

"A minute." Langfordson's cadaverous face brightened. "Excellent. You'll attach that to your report, of course."

"Yes, sir." (Damn it, at Cape Remittance one hadn't called even the Resident "sir" except in public!) "It ought to be along some time this afternoon, or at the latest by tomorrow morning."

"I'm going off on my week's leave this afternoon. Air Commodore Quaritch is coming back from his tomorrow. So you'd better send your report direct to him, as Group Captain Dorland's still sick."

Langfordson's petulance had given way to relief. He stroked his blond moustache. His whole demeanour showed that the interview was over.

"Gallio," Wordsworth told himself; and, "On the whole I got out of that rather well."

Aloud he said, "That shall be done, sir," and escaped into the corridor, where he stopped to light one of his own cigarettes.

Returning to his own room, Wordsworth found it empty; and played with the routine papers in his In tray for the

next half hour. The more he considered his talk with Langfordson, the more he realised his own impotence, his own lack of authority. All he could do was to say "Yes, sir"—and make a report—and hope that somebody would act on it.

That nobody, however, would act on his report once they had read Negresco's minute seemed the most moribund of certainties.

"Suspects," he brooded. "Motives. Opportunities. But not one scrap of real evidence. And what the devil's happened to Guy? He can't have been in the War Room all this time."

On which the door swung open, and Guy himself, for once a little above himself, said:

"W.W., you're a ruddy wizard. We had to wade through reams and reams of casualty telegrams—that's why I've been such a hell of a time—but Patterson's squadron was in the group Ashdown commanded. And your pal Moxom, who knows Boulte fairly well, says that if there was one person in the world he really cared for it was his half brother, Derek. Moxom says that Boulte's never been the same man since it happened. Moxom thinks it's driven him half crazy."

"If you'd seen him in this room this morning," said Wordsworth, "you'd have thought him more than half crazy. He told Prisworthy and myself, flat out, that Ashdown had been bumped off by someone who hated his guts."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I

AT WORDSWORTH'S suggestion Conington—successful in obtaining an American thirty-eight revolver from a recent shipment—practised weekly at the range. They went together, sacrificing most of their lunch hour, that Wednesday afternoon.

"The only way I'll ever kill a Hun with this," drawled Conington after twelve shots, "is if I catch him by the back of the neck with my left hand and ram the barrel down his gullet with my right."

The instructor laughed and put up another target. Wordsworth took out his automatic, clicked off the safety catch and balanced the weapon in his right hand.

"A chap who ranches in South America taught me how to shoot with a revolver," he said. "He used to mix ball and blank, so that I never knew which I was firing. It's not a bad tip for trigger work. But an automatic's much easier than a revolver. You just point your forefinger along the barrel—and squeeze."

He fired as he spoke. Five shots were bull's eyes, and two within an inch of the black. Then he asked for a fresh target; reloaded, and slid the pistol back into its holster.

"You don't often need a gun," he quoted. "But when you do you need it damn quick. Tell me when I'm to shoot, Guy."

Conington waited a few seconds, and called "Fire."

That time Wordsworth shot from the hip, scoring two bulls and five inners. "Swanking a bit," he chided himself. All the same Guy's outspoken admiration was rather pleasant. And as the instructor cleaned their weapons and re-

placed their ammunition, he couldn't help thinking, "How Michael would have enjoyed this. Maybe I'll teach him to shoot one day."

Then he remembered who Michael's father had been—and his whole mind seemed to go black.

2

"You're in a sweet mood this afternoon, W.W.," said Conington, some two hours later as they drank their tea and munched their biscuits. "You've done nothing but curse ever since we got back. Hadn't you better take a day off tomorrow? Oh, I forgot, you'll have to see Quaritch."

"Sugar Quaritch. He'll have to wait. I'm running up to Blessingford."

"The devil you are. Oughtn't you to ask Bomber Command first? They don't like our going to groups without their authority."

"Perhaps I ought. But I'm not ruddy well going to."

"All right. Have it your own way, squadron leader. Only—when you're reduced to the ranks, don't say the gipsy didn't warn you."

"Shut up, Guy. And ring through to the pool for a shorthand typist. If we don't get this stuff off to Staveleigh tonight he'll moan our ears off."

"Will you dictate it?"

"No. You're the literary genius of this outfit, at least in your own estimation."

"Love? Or indigestion?" meditated Conington, ringing up the typing pool. The love-ridden (or indigestion-ridden?) one pushed the rough draft of the paper Staveleigh had asked for across their desks and snapped out, "Keep it short for the lord's sake. None of your journalistic flourishes."

Somebody knocked. Conington called, "Come in." And Miss King entered, saying:

"You asked for a shorthand typist, flight lieutenant."

"I did. Do have a chair."

Guy rose, and drew a chair towards his own. The girl

seated herself, and opened her notebook. Watching them covertly Wordsworth thought. "She's not bad, if you like big blonds with blue eyes and teeth like tombstones. Fun—if he tries to get off with her."

But Guy's, "Did you enjoy the film yesterday afternoon?" seemed to prove that he had already got off with the girl; until she answered:

"So it was you sitting next to me. I thought I recognised you. But one meets so many R.A.F. officers in this place. No. I didn't really care for the picture. There was too much war in it for my taste."

She poised her pencil. Guy began his dictation.

"I hope I'm not going too fast for you," he said after the first few sentences.

"Oh, no. You can go faster if you like. My English shorthand speed is a hundred and seventy."

Guy's words quickened. The pencil flew.

"Just a minute," interrupted Wordsworth. "I don't feel that last paragraph is quite clear. Read it back, please."

Miss King read out the paragraph. Wordsworth made his alteration.

"One plus two," said Guy. "Will it take very long?"

"Not more than twenty minutes."

The girl rose. Wordsworth said, "I gather Miss Loftus is better." She eyed him coldly, but her answer was amiable:

"Yes. She came back today. I see you have a good memory, squadron leader."

"That young woman could rouse my enthusiasm," said Guy Conington as the door closed on her high-held head and her square shoulders. "She seems jolly capable, too."

Twenty minutes to the second saw her laying the typescript on his desk. He read it through, and passed it over to Wordsworth for signature.

"I gather"—he heard Wordsworth say—"that you can take dictation in other languages as well as English."

"Only in French, I'm afraid. And that's not much use now. I know a little German, too. But only to speak it."

Wordsworth's notebook happened to be open at a certain page. He glanced at it, and asked:

"I wonder if you know enough German to tell me what '*Blatt*' means?"

"A leaf, squadron leader."

But the rest of Izod's memorised phrase seemed to defeat her.

"It sounds like slang," she said. "Why don't you ask Mr. Kahn in the German section? Or Miss Kemble in 'Translations.' She'd be sure to know."

"Have we got Miss Kemble's number?" asked Wordsworth when they were alone again.

"Yes."

"Then get on to her, will you?"

Miss Kemble said scornfully from the suburb to which she and her polyglot staff had been banished:

"I should have thought that anybody with the slightest knowledge of colloquial German would know what '*Blatt vor dem Munde halten*' means. It means, 'Keep your mouth shut'; literally 'Hold a leaf in front of it.' "

The word "*Scheibenkleister*," however, defeated even Miss Kemble.

Wordsworth thanked her; and, at Guy's suggestion, they packed up for the day.

3

Again that Wednesday Wordsworth dined in his own flat—to intermittent gunfire and the occasional whistle of a fairly close bomb. Usually unperturbed, tonight he felt restless. Dinner over, he went downstairs and, after a word with the hall porter, out into the street.

A policeman was going his rounds. A warden came along. Wordsworth recognised the warden—an aging padre with whom he had exchanged an occasional word at his club.

The padre said, "Hallo. Do you live here? It's fairly quiet this evening."

"Would you care to come in for a drink?"

"There's nothing I'd like better. But I'm on duty till midnight."

The figure in the tin hat and the clergyman's cloth tramped away. Looking up and along the street Wordsworth saw the high yellow gleam of shellbursts. After a second or so he heard the shells detonate, and fragments pattering down. Ashamed of himself—the padre must be rising seventy—he returned to his flat, and tried to concentrate on a sixpenny novel.

Forty minutes later the all clear sounded—but with no calming effect on his nerves.

"What the hell's the matter with me?" he asked himself. "I've been as jumpy as a cat ever since lunchtime."

The question stayed with him while he undressed, and kept him awake for nearly an hour. Just before he fell asleep, he confessed to himself that he had known, and been shirking the answer, all the time.

"Gale was Ashdown's," he realised. "Michael is half Ashdown's. Am I really contemplating marriage at the price of fathering Ashdown's child?"

But the answer to this question could not be shirked. Whatever the price, he wanted Gale.

All the same, wants could be suppressed. There were other women in the world, women like Flossie. So hadn't he better go on taking his fun where he could find it—and give matrimony a complete miss?

He slept on that, but woke more restless than ever, in two minds about his visit to Blessingford. After all, it was none of his business to find out who had murdered Ashdown.

Nine o'clock, nevertheless, found him heading for the north.

He drove slowly, noting fresh bomb damage since Monday morning when he had taken this same way with Gale. The senseless destruction began to infuriate him. Why didn't we pay the Huns back in their own coin? Why was he too old to fly in this war? Fun—to drop a two-thousand pound bomb

on some German suburb. If they massacred our women and children, why didn't we massacre theirs?

Rain began to fall as he reached Tapworth and swung to his right. He was thinking of Gale again. And he mustn't. He must concentrate on the job he had to do at Blessingford. Luckily, one had a pal at group headquarters. If anybody could give one the straight tip about that row between Boulte and Ashdown, "Grandfather" could. A stout chap. No damn nonsense about him. And more or less one's own age.

Rain became storm over a flat countryside. With all the signposts removed, one had to be careful not to take a wrong fork. He stopped; consulted his map; lit a cigarette and drove on again, his mind concentrated on its problem.

Ramsay? Boulte? The Dowdys? Or that other, infinitely less credible, infinitely more melodramatic solution? No—damn it—that was too far-fetched.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I

GROUP headquarters—a rambling Victorian countryhouse, half overgrown with ivy, and half with leafless Virginia creeper—looked even more forlorn than Wordsworth's one recollection of it. An old soldier in battledress saluted him as he ran through a pelt of storm from the garage to the porch.

He showed his pass to the fresh-faced R.A.F. corporal inside the doorway; asked for "Squadron Leader Manders, Intelligence," and was conducted up bare stairs, round a twisting corridor, into a dark room where two junior officers bent over a map of the Ruhr, and a senior sat at a desk, by which stood a flat telephone board with many keys.

"Morning, Grandfather," said Wordsworth, saluting.

"W.W. by all that's holy. What brings you into these wilds?"

Squadron Leader Hilary Manders rose tall from his desk, and extended a friendly hand. Prematurely gray hair, now snow white, had given him his nickname in the old days of the Royal Flying Corps. Since then, his moon of a clean-shaved face seemed to have grown even larger, even ruddier and definitely heavier of jowl. But the sharp gray eyes, the cut of the humorous lips, and the voice with the trace of a brogue were the same.

He introduced his subordinates, and offered the inevitable cigarette.

"I suppose you want to see our Security bloke," he began. "He's out this morning, but I expect he'll be back by lunch time."

"No. I came to see you."

"Privately?" Grandfather had always been quick on the uptake.

"Well, as a matter of fact, it is rather private."

The telephone board emitted a buzz. One of the juniors went to it, pulled a key and picked up the receiver, announcing:

"Major Vesey would like to speak to you, sir."

"Ask him if he can give you a message."

"He only wants to know if you're going over to Ludworth this afternoon. He's lunching and spending the night there."

"Tell him, yes. I'll be along at about half past two."

Grandfather glanced at his wristwatch; said, "I won't be more than ten minutes, W.W.," and picked up a sheaf of teleprint messages, grumbling, "These Y forms are more like war correspondents' stories than intelligence reports. Get me Bomber Command, will you, Stuttaford?"

Bomber Command Intelligence, more than a hundred miles away, answered instant. Grandfather said:

"About those double-beam searchlights. All we know is what the pilot told us. He won't be awake yet. He didn't get in till five o'clock. But I'm going over to Ludworth myself this afternoon—and I'll talk to him personally . . . No. The tail gunner didn't see them."

Another telephone talk, the signature of some papers, followed. Then Grandfather rose, saying:

"You'd better come along to my bedroom, W.W. That's the only place I've got to myself."

2

The frieze above the stained wallpaper of the attic room betrayed it a one-time nursery. Grandfather's camp bed occupied almost the whole of one wall. Over the bed hung a photograph of Grandfather's wife and his three children. His remaining furniture consisted of a canvas washstand, a folding table, and a rhoorkee chair.

"I make my servants a damn sight more comfortable than

this," he grumbled. "They'd give notice if I didn't. It's as cold as hell, too. And the roof leaks."

He dumped himself heavily on the bed; pulled a pipe from his pocket; filled it, and lit up.

"How's the rheumatism?" asked Wordsworth.

"Bloody. Go ahead. What can I do for you?"

"You know Ashdown died last week?"

"Bottom Upwards! Yes: it was in the papers."

"Well, I'm trying to investigate the cause of his death."

"Why? Anything mysterious about it?"

"Yes."

"Criminally mysterious?"

"That's more than a possibility."

"Well, come clean, W.W. I'm all ears."

Wordsworth meditated a second or so—and decided to talk. This man with the sharp gray eyes was an "old lag" like himself. He spoke the same language. He could be trusted. Told most of the tale, he listened carefully, not opening his lips till the final:

"You see what I'm after. I've got to find out if Millicent Ashdown told me the truth; if Boulte did actually threaten to kill her husband."

"Yes. I see that," said Grandfather then. "And I might be able to help you. But only on one condition, that you keep me out of it."

"I will if I can."

"That's not good enough, W.W. I've got a job I can handle here. And I'm not going to risk losing it. If you pin this thing on Boulte, there'll be one hell of a stink. And once there's a stink . . . You don't know the R.A.F. as well as I do. Otherwise you'd throw your hand in."

"I'm not going to chuck up the sponge yet, Grandfather."

"Very well. That's your business. But my business is to keep out of stinks. So—either it's a deal or it isn't."

"All right, then. It's a deal."

Grandfather's tale was short, but very much to the point. At first hand ("That's another reason why you've got to

keep me out of it") he knew very little; at second hand, quite a lot. He had been on leave when the aircraft of which Derek Patterson was captain failed—with three others—to return.

Everybody who did return from that raid spoke of particularly heavy flak barrage. Major Vesey ("he's one of Boulte's officers, attached to us for A.A. intelligence duties") decided that all four casualties were due to anti-aircraft fire; and had reported this direct to Boulte.

"I happen to know," interpolated Grandfather, eyeing Wordsworth keenly, "that Vesey dislikes Boulte. But he's a conscientious young fellow; and he added to his report that, in his opinion, the barrage might have been avoided if another route, suggested by Boulte, had been taken to the target."

"And why wasn't that suggestion adopted?"

"For one reason because Ashdown would never let us circulate any of Boulte's papers to stations."

A silence followed. Grandfather's pipe had gone out. He relit it, and broke the silence with:

"Ashdown was perfectly within his rights. He had a theory that if pilots were told too much about flak, they wouldn't go down to their targets."

"I see."

Another silence followed, broken this time by Wordsworth's:

"That gets me some way, but not far enough. What action did Boulte take? Did he have things out with Ashdown?"

"He had things out with me first. On the telephone. When I told him that it wasn't my fault, that I had to obey orders, he said—those were his actual words—'Your blasted orders cost Derek's life. You're not an intelligence officer, you're just a bloody flunkey. Wait till I see that swine Ashdown.'"

"And did he?"

"Yes. Alone. At least, they both thought they were alone. Actually——"

Grandfather lowered his voice for several sentences. When he had finished Wordsworth said:

"If you were anyone else, I'd think you were pulling my leg. Can I come over to Ludworth with you? I'd like a talk with this fellow Kitchin."

"Of course you can. Does the name mean anything to you?"

"Not unless he's the chap who writes about bird life."

"He is. And he's nobody's fool. Let's go and get some grub, shall we?"

"Right."

3

The mess was small, because most of its married members had lodgings in the village, but very cheery. Over his first sherry Wordsworth sensed that atmosphere of a "happy ship" so lacking at the Air Ministry. They ate simply but abundantly. Everyone called the mess waiters by name.

"I rather envy you," he told Grandfather, whose car was to follow them, as they set off in Minnie Mouse.

"We weren't quite so happy in Ashdown's time. But he didn't come to mess very often. He had his wife up here. Damn good-looking woman. Funny they didn't get on better—at least according to gossip."

Grandfather's talk turned—rather hurriedly, it seemed to Wordsworth—to service topics. Once beyond the village—they were taking a short cut to the aerodrome—he confined it to directing their way.

A last lane brought them to a turnpike; and half a mile farther to white gates, a gravel sweep and the three-storeyed red brick building of the station mess. Men were at work on the roof.

"We had a small bomb through it a night or two ago," explained Grandfather. "Rather different from the old huts near Bailleul, eh, W.W.?"

Both thought of those old huts as they entered the high well-lit anteroom, with the big centre coffee table, the powerful radio, which was hardly ever turned off, the five writing

desks, and the many green leather armchairs, more than half of them empty, the rest occupied by pilots, talking low-voiced in threes or couples.

A man of about thirty, the only one in khaki, rose from the desk at which he had been writing, and said, "Hallo, Manders. I wanted to see you about my next lecture."

Grandfather introduced him as, "Major Vesey. Our flak liaison officer. You probably know him better as a golfer than a gunner. Have you seen Kitchin anywhere about, Vesey?"

"He was here about ten minutes ago. He told me he'd be over in the Ops. room if you wanted him. Do you think there's any chance of our operating tonight?"

"Fifty-fifty, I should say." Grandfather looked beyond the windows where low clouds still scudded though rain had ceased during lunch. "I'd cut your next lecture a bit shorter if I were you, Vesey. Make it more of a chat."

"That's Izod's idea, too. I'll get on the phone to him later—and tell him you agree."

Vesey returned to his desk. The two squadron leaders went outside again; and stepped into the headquarters car.

"If it weren't for Izod," Grandfather confided as they halted at the doorway of another red brick building, much lower than the mess, beyond which loomed the hangars, "your friend Boulte would have got the push long ago. He has about as much tact as an elephant's foot."

They dismounted, and went down a bare passage, past various doors, into what might have been a schoolroom, except for its telephone table—its only occupant a tallish officer who turned from the blackboard he had been studying to show an emaciated face with deeply sunken eyes behind horn-rimmed spectacles and a graying moustache definitely in need of a clip.

"Kitchin — Wordsworth," introduced Grandfather. "Wordsworth's just come up from the Air Ministry. He rather wants to have a talk with you."

"About Shakespeare and the musical glasses?"

Kitchin's voice was more impressive than his appearance. The laugh at the end of the sentence sounded friendly. Wordsworth noticed that he wore wings, and a double row of ribbons which included the white and transverse violet of the D.F.C.

"It's a little more specific than that," he laughed back.

"You remember what you told me about Boulte and our last A.O.C.," * cut in Grandfather.

"But, damn it, I told you that in strict confidence."

"I'm sorry, old boy. I haven't breathed a word to another soul. But there's a possibility that Ashdown—well, that he didn't die a natural death. And Wordsworth—well, he's looking into the matter."

"Good God," said Kitchin; and repeated himself twice, teetering from one foot to the other. After which he said, inspecting Wordsworth carefully from behind his spectacles:

"What do you want me to do? Just confirm that Manders told you the truth?"

"I'd rather have it again in your own words."

"All right. If you insist. But we can't very well talk in here. Somebody's always liable to come in. I'd like to show you the actual place, too. Or rather both places. Shall I bring my fieldglasses?"

"It might be as well. Are you coming with us, Grandfather?"

"I'd much rather not."

4

Kitchin wore no greatcoat, and walked like a Marathon runner. Wordsworth found it difficult to keep abreast of him—along an asphalted path, past one of the bomb stores, past a hangar in which an equipment officer was supervising repairs to the port wing of a heavy bomber, past other aircraft, one with engines running, which were parked in the open, and diagonally across four hundred yards of sodden grass.

They came to a hedge, and climbed a rail.

* Air Officer Commanding.

"We'd better stand," said Kitchin. "I was crouching in the ditch, of course. One often has to for bird watching. But it's a bit wet today. And the field of view's pretty much the same."

He uncased his field glasses and handed them to Wordsworth, remarking:

"I don't expect you've ever used anything quite like these. They were made for me, in Germany. You focus them by turning the centre screw first, and then the eyepieces. It's most important to get the focus absolutely correct, because it varies for different distances. Take a look at that blast wall first."

Kitchin pointed to the back of the building they had just left. Wordsworth estimated the distance at six hundred yards. Having adjusted the glasses he was amazed at their magnification. A young aircraftman happened to emerge through the gap in the blast wall. He could actually see the pattern on the boy's buttons—and told Kitchin so.

"Boulte," said Kitchin, "was in almost exactly the same place when I first saw him. Ashdown was just coming away from that hangar. Boulte waited for him. I saw his lips move, and his hand go to his holster. He undid the strap, and kept his hand on the butt of his revolver."

"You're sure of that?"

"I'd take my oath on it."

"What did Ashdown do?"

"He just walked towards Boulte, who didn't salute. I could only see half of Ashdown's face; but I know it went rather red when they were within a few feet of each other. Ashdown had the devil's own temper when he was roused, you know. And nothing made him so angry as not being treated with what he called 'due respect for my rank.'"

Kitchin stopped, and began again:

"About the lip reading. I shouldn't wonder if you didn't find that part rather difficult to swallow. But I'm totally deaf in one ear. And it's easy enough after a bit of practise. Otherwise I'd never have got through my medical. Anyway

I saw what Boulte said quite distinctly. Ashdown was within about five feet of him by then—and one or two men were standing just outside the hangar. Out of earshot, of course.”

Again Kitchin stopped; and that time Wordsworth had to prompt him, “Well, what did Boulte say?”

“He said, ‘Stand still if you don’t want a bullet in your guts.’ Ashdown stood, and said something—I guessed what from Boulte’s answer, ‘I’m quite sane and I know perfectly well what I’m doing. I don’t mind killing you in front of witnesses. You’re a bloody murderer anyway. But I’m damned if I’m going to talk to you where anybody can overhear us. We’re going to have this thing out man to man.’ I lost the rest, because Boulte moved. But they walked away together, at least almost together, towards that copse.”

He pointed to the copse, not more than eight hundred yards diagonally from where they stood, and continued:

“Both of them had their backs to me till they reached the copse. Boulte walked about two feet behind Ashdown. He never took his hand from his revolver. It looked rather like a scene out of a gangster film. I remember wondering if I ought to do something about it. But what could I do? I wasn’t armed—and Ashdown would have been dead meat long before I got to him.”

“You think Boulte really meant to murder then?”

“If you’d seen his face before he turned away, you’d have thought so too.”

The rest of Kitchin’s tale was rather an anticlimax. Boulte and Ashdown had stopped, and faced each other (“their side faces towards me”) when they reached the copse. They had talked for more than ten minutes. Kitchin couldn’t see what either of them said; but he distinctly remembered some of Ashdown’s gestures, and Boulte’s pulling out his revolver.

“But he didn’t point it at Ashdown. He just played with it. And he was still playing with it, twirling it round one finger by the trigger guard, when Ashdown left and began to walk back alone. I saw Ashdown full face then. He looked pretty white, but he never turned his head over his shoulder,

and I imagine that must have taken a bit of doing. I didn't like the fellow much. None of us did. But I couldn't help admiring him when I saw him a little later on. He came in while I was briefing some of our pilots and talked to them when I'd finished. You'd never have thought he'd been within an inch of being shot about half an hour before."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I

GRANDFATHER was still in the operations room, talking to three pilots, one of them a sergeant, when Kitchin and Wordsworth came back. A composite photograph lay on the sloping desk over which the four of them were bending. Grandfather seemed in two minds about it. The sergeant pilot said, "I'm sure we got at least two hits on her deck." A young intelligence officer called from the telephone, "Group says it's okay for night, sir." One of the other pilots, a juvenile squadron leader, ejaculated an Australian, "Goodo!"

Half an hour later, Wordsworth was on his way back to London, driving his fastest to make the most of the daylight, and thinking while he drove.

2

For a few miles, Wordsworth's thoughts considered Kitchin's evidence. Millicent Ashdown had told him the truth. Boulte's threat to murder was proved. But would a man who might have killed in hot blood and risked the consequences deliberately plot a subtle killing? Derek Patterson had died two months back, Ashdown only eight days ago.

His mind switched to that last scene in the Ops. room. What kids those pilots were. But what guts they must have. Five, six, seven hours in one of those big metal machines. Over the North Sea, too. And at night. He'd never cared for going up at night. Or for flying over water. Such good-looking kids. One couldn't bear to think of them bailing out . . . drowning . . . slowly . . . in pitch darkness . . . with an icy wind whipping the sea.

Damn it, did one lose one's own guts as one grew older? Was one going sentimental? Michael wanted to join the R.A.F. When he was their age, Michael would look just like one of those kids. Blast. Blast and damnation. There one went again, already fathering Ashdown's child in one's imagination. This sort of thing had simply got to stop.

Twenty miles on, Minnie Mouse's petrol gauge, always slightly optimistic, showed her down to the last gallon. He ought to have had her filled up at the aerodrome. Now he'd have to part with one of his precious coupons.

Another two miles brought him to a wayside petrol station. It was lighting-up time by then, with the sky almost clear of clouds, and the wind dropping. As we were having a crack at Jerry tonight, he'd probably have one at us.

Five miles beyond the petrol station—whose attendant had scorned Minnie Mouse for "one of those Dago contraptions, you'll have a job getting spares for her, I shouldn't wonder"—he caught a glimpse of Tapworth's factory chimneys; and turned, almost without thinking, to his left.

"Ought to have been right," he knew. "But it can't be more than three miles longer by Little Tapworth." And almost immediately he found himself slowing, stopping at the gate of Manor Cottage.

While he still hesitated about dismounting, he saw the low masked gleam of an approaching headlamp. Out of the Rolls-Bentley, as the brakes held it, stepped first Izod and then Gale.

One had to dismount now. He did so; and saluted Gale, who said, "Hallo. Are you on leave? Were you coming to visit me?"

Her words came a little too fast. She was obviously surprised—and possibly annoyed.

He heard himself say, "I've just been up to Blessingford. I thought I'd look in on the off chance of finding you."

She invited him in. The door under the porch opened. Michael ran out to them, shouting, "Hallo, mummy. Hallo, Uncle Frank."

Frank Izod, as though very much at home there, followed them into the little house.

"So you've been to Blessingford," he began while he and Wordsworth were taking off their coats. "I didn't know you had anything to do with groups."

His words came a little too slowly. He was obviously curious—and possibly not too pleased.

"Grandfather Manders," said Wordsworth, managing to keep his own voice completely normal, "is an old pal of mine. I hadn't much to do, so I thought I might as well take a bite of lunch with him. He introduced me to one of your officers, a chap called Vesey."

"Vesey always was bad at names," volunteered Izod; and checked there, only to continue, hurriedly again:

"As a matter of fact he phoned me just before I left, and told me they'd had someone up from the Ministry."

Wordsworth, thinking his hardest, left it at that.

3

The next ten minutes would have been difficult without Izod's tact.

Gale, calling down the staircase, "Go in and help yourselves to drinks. You know where they are, Frank. I simply must get tidy," left them alone.

Izod went towards the kitchen, and returned carrying a full tray and a bucket of ice. He shepherded Wordsworth into the sitting room; said, "I hope a martini's all right for you," and began mixing.

"I shall have to buzz off pretty soon," he went on, shaking dexterously. "My sister and her husband have just billeted themselves on me. And they've brought their daughter with them. She wants me to get her into the Waafs. God knows how long they'll stay. Probably for the duration. And my cook's leaving me at the end of the month."

He talked on while he filled two glasses from the shaker. Before they were empty Gale came in with Michael.

"Thank goodness I'm not on duty tonight," she said.

"We've had three or four alerts in London today; and although I simply loathe going down to our shelters some of our clients insist on it."

"Did you hear any bombs, mummy?" asked Michael.

"No, darling."

Izod remarked. "We had a couple of panics at the Ministry. What use our spotters are supposed to be when they can't see anything, I don't know."

"You've had bad weather in town, then?" Wordsworth spoke.

"Pretty bad up till three o'clock."

Conversation dwindled. Izod finished his drink and looked at his wristwatch.

"I'll have to be off now, Gale," he said. But his dark blue eyes betrayed reluctance; and he held her hand for a second or so longer than Wordsworth approved. She saw him out, too—and that was as definitely annoying as Michael's:

"Uncle Frank gave me my bow and arrows. He's always giving me things. And his motorcar's much bigger than yours."

Annoyance, however, gave way to the old excitement when the returning Gale suggested:

"As you're so late, why don't you stay for supper? We can have it early, as soon as I've put Michael to bed."

4

"It's high tea really, William," said Gale, as they sat down to table some three quarters of an hour later. "That's one of your British customs I really am partial to. We get plenty of eggs, thank goodness—and nanny won't touch her bacon ration—and I bought some kippers yesterday. Everyone who writes to me from America seems to think we're on the verge of starvation."

"The last chap who wrote to me from Cape Remittance seemed to think the same."

"Tell me about Cape Remittance, William. Is it really as wide open as people say?"

"Well—it's pretty free and easy still. But nothing like what it used to be when I first went there."

"New Orleans used to be the same way in Huey Long's time. But I hear that's altered, too."

They exchanged information about what Gale called their "home towns" while they ate. Her broad-mindedness pleased him. In conversation she appeared to have no inhibitions. One might almost have been talking with a man.

"Don't you wish you'd never come back to England?" she asked.

"Sometimes. But I shouldn't like to be out of this war. What really worries me is that I'm not more in it. I'm only a glorified clerk really, you see."

"But you don't want to fly again?"

"Don't I just. If I were only twenty years younger."

He broke off. Watching him Gale told herself, "He really means that. I wish I didn't like him so much. After all, he'd hardly want to marry me. I'm not respectable enough."

Aloud she said, "I wouldn't mind being a few years younger myself, William"; and wished she had said anything but that, because it gave him such an opening.

"Let's go into the other room," she went on quickly, "so nanny can wash up."

They lit cigarettes, and went towards the sitting room. He opened the door for her; stood while she settled herself in her chair by the fire.

"What really took you to Blessingford?" she asked. "Or aren't I allowed to know?"

He smiled at her, and took the corner of the sofa on the other side of the fireplace, before countering:

"So you heard what I told Izod?"

She smiled back, "Yes. But I don't believe it. And I don't imagine he did either. Frank's extremely acute, you know."

"I thought I was rather convincing."

"You certainly didn't convince me."

Still smiling, she tossed her cigarette among the logs.

"The first time I ever saw you," she said slowly, "I trusted you, goodness knows why, with a really big secret. Can't you even trust me with a little one?"

But could he trust her? Wordsworth asked himself. Could one ever trust a woman? And simultaneously a new suspicion flashed across through his mind.

According to Gale, Izod knew nothing of her relations with Ashdown. But supposing—just supposing—that Gale had not told the truth; that Izod did know? In that case wouldn't he have been almost as anxious as Boulte to get rid of Ashdown, mightn't he have helped Boulte to plant that phony shell?

This new suspicion—added to the recollection that Gale herself had suggested how much harm it might do her and Michael if he proved Ashdown's death to have been murder—hurt, and hurt intolerably.

"I won't believe it. I simply won't. She's straight. She's as straight as a gunbarrel," he said to himself; and to her, he too speaking very slowly:

"I'm still being the little policeman, I'm afraid. Do you mind very much?"

"What's the use if I do?"

She fell silent, smiling no longer, lips compressed, one hand working a little.

"I'm sorry, Gale. You mustn't mind. There's nothing for you to be frightened of."

"Who said I was frightened?"

"You did. The last time we met. You told me you were afraid it would mean people knowing about—about— Oh, blast. For two pins, I'd chuck the whole thing up. That's what everybody wants me to do. You included."

The black mood was on Wordsworth again. Gale could see his pupils alternately contracting and dilating. Curiously, intuition told her the underlying cause of his anger. Still more curiously, she could not help being a little glad.

"I'd forgotten telling you that," she said, her hand quiet

again, her whole demeanour apparently placid. "Don't worry about me. I'm not frightened any more. Perhaps you won't have to bring me into it at all. Why are you so angry?"

"I don't know."

Her demeanour changed again. Despite the blackness of his mood, he was conscious of purpose in her.

"I believe you're angry with me," she went on, speaking slowly again.

"Don't be so absurd."

"I wonder if I am being absurd." And suddenly her golden brown eyes held his dark ones; suddenly she shot at him:

"I was only nineteen when I met Marcus. He always swore he'd marry me when he got enough promotion."

Then she fell altogether silent—and he, too—and in that silence it seemed to each of them that they could hear the other's heart beating, yet all the time each knew that it was their own heartbeats they really heard, and that their own heartbeats were almost choking them. Until, after what seemed to each of them an intolerable while, their heartbeats began to subside, and their minds to grow a little more normal. And after that, to each of them, came reaction, so that they could not help laughing at each other, stupidly, as though at some ridiculous joke.

But even when they ceased from laughing, it was a little time before Wordsworth found enough voice to say, "I really ought to be going now," and Gale, "Yes. I suppose you ought. It's a pity I can't put you up like I did the other night. But there'll only be a scandal in the village if we make a habit of it."

And after that, neither knowing how these things happened, they were on their feet, and approaching each other, slowly, conscious of the heartbeats again, and of each other's eyes, each other's hands, each other's lips, each other's bodies.

Their hands, their lips trembled in that second before they met; but their bodies were a little rigid. For their minds had not quite lost the inhibitions of their several years.

"Gale," he began when she broke from that first kiss, "Gale, sweetheart, can't I stay?"

"You know you can't. You know that if I let you, you'd only think badly of me afterwards."

"I shouldn't. I swear I shouldn't."

"Oh, yes, you would."

"That's not true."

"Isn't it, William?"

He shook his head in denial; but Gale only laughed:

"It's absolutely true—only you're too stubborn to admit it."

5

. . . And, "Blast," thought William Wordsworth, driving slowly away from Manor Cottage a few moments later, "she was quite right."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I

WORDSWORTH was eight miles beyond Tapworth on his way to London, but Gale still sat by the fire, smoking one cigarette after the other, a deep crease between her brows.

"I wish I hadn't let him go," she kept thinking. "I'm so lonely—and I was never meant to be a spinster."

Yet what else could she have done? Nothing sensible. And one just had to be sensible, for Michael's sake no less than for one's own.

"You let yourself go with Marcus," thought continued. "And look at the result."

The telephone bell, interrupting concentration, startled her. Imagination suggested, "William has had an accident," but the voice was Frank's.

"I only rang up for a chat," said Frank Izod, "and to know whether you'd like to be driven up to town tomorrow. My guests have gone to bed, and cook's promised to reconsider her notice. So all's quiet on the home front, at any rate for the moment. Has your guest gone?"

"Yes. A long time ago. I think I'll go up to town by train tomorrow, Frank."

"Just as you like, my dear. The car's at your service whenever you want it. I've any amount of petrol these days—thanks to this new 'Give your neighbour a lift' scheme. By the way, have I got to be jealous of Wordsworth?"

"You've no right to be jealous of anybody."

"Unfortunately. You're a hard-hearted widow, aren't you, my dear?"

"You ought to leave off calling me my dear. It's so very fatherly."

"There you go again—always harping on the difference between our ages. But never mind. I can take it—even if you decide to marry your policeman."

Her cheeks reddened. She was glad he couldn't see her. "Don't be so absurd, Frank."

"You might do worse." His voice remained irritatingly calm. "He's good-looking. He's got lots of medals. And he's nobody's fool. Even Tony admits that. And Tony's not given to allowing other people much intelligence. By the way, I suppose our mutual friend didn't tell you the real reason for his trip to Blessingford?"

It flashed through Gale's mind that "by the way" from Frank always meant that he was after something; and that he had used the phrase twice.

"I thought he went to see a friend," she parried.

"That's what he told me. But I find it a little hard to believe."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you over the phone. And anyway it's all rather hush hush. I suppose you're itching for me to ring off now. It's past your bedtime."

"Well, I am a bit sleepy, Frank."

"Then good night, my hard-hearted young widow."

He hung up. Gale lit herself a final cigarette; went up to her bedroom, and began to undress. She had not told the truth about feeling sleepy. Her brain couldn't be more alert. Why was Frank so anxious to find out William's reason for visiting Blessingford? Could Frank know that Marcus had been murdered? He might know more than that. Frank was so horribly acute—and so horribly secretive. And why had he suddenly taken to stressing that word "widow?"

As she inspected her semi-nude figure in the long inside mirror of her open wardrobe, Gale's thoughts grew a little confused. One really must watch one's diet. Marcus had been in command at Blessingford. There were no more

oranges. What was one going to do without orange juice? Could Frank's use of that word "widow" mean that he knew about oneself and Marcus?

"I told William he didn't," she mused. "I should simply loathe William to think that I lied to him. If he thought that, he might even suspect me. Lordy, what a fool I could make of myself—only I shan't let myself—over that man. I do hope he's got back to London safely. I do hope there isn't a raid on there."

But London's guns had been in action since seven o'clock.

2

Wordsworth, driving the last of his way, saw a speckled band of shellbursts pinpointing the Hampstead sky. Below the ribbon, parachute flares dropped slowly earthward. Here and there, glowed fires.

He stopped, and put on his helmet. This must be a pretty severe raid. Those must be the Primrose Hill guns. What a row they made. Should one go on, and risk it—or take cover for a bit? Might as well go on. Just as risky here as anywhere else. Finchley Road in this war couldn't be as bad as the Menin Road in the last one, he'd been along that often enough. Couldn't it, though? Where was this one coming to? Right on one's head. No. Short. Quite a long way short. Not such a long way short. Gosh!

The bomb detonated. He heard panes shatter, bricks falling. Minnie Mouse, still stationary, might have been at speed with a bad wheel-wobble. Automatically one hand was shielding his eyes, the other the back of his neck. He thought, stupidly, "If my bloody windows smash, I'll have a job getting new glass." Then Minnie Mouse stopped shaking, and he knew her undamaged, himself unhurt.

Two figures ran by, and up the road. He started his engine, and followed them. Some hundred yards on, a torch flashed. The figures halted. He jumped out, joined them and saw a third—a woman's.

"Nobody hurt," said the woman. "At least I don't think

so. It landed right in that empty house. You take the right side of the road, Harry—and you take the left, John. They were all in their shelters ten minutes ago. But somebody may have come out since. I'll get to the phone."

"Anything I can do?" asked Wordsworth.

"No, thanks."

He went back to his car. No more flares were dropping; and only a few shellbursts pinpointed the sky ahead. He drove on, up the hill, careful lest there should be new craters; and turned sharp right. The first bend between the houses showed him a fire; trailer pumps in action; a stretcher party totting its casualty to an ambulance. A policeman's torch signalled him to stop; a cultured voice said:

"You can't get past, I'm afraid. Where are you making for?"

"The West End."

"Then I'd take that turning if I were you; and when you get to the end of the road, turn left."

More directions followed. After ten minutes Wordsworth recognised the wall of Lord's cricket ground. As far as one could judge, the raid seemed to be over. He made the Edgware Road, Marble Arch, Park Lane, his garage, without further difficulty.

"Thought they might have got you, sir," grinned the night-duty man. "They've been at it for the best part of four hours now. We've had one fire bomb on the roof and another in the yard. I snuffed the one in the yard myself."

"Good for you. They're pretty well finished, I think."

"Seems like it, sir."

But when he was midway between his garage and the flats, Wordsworth heard the Hyde Park guns fire a ragged salvo—and while he still listened for the four detonations, an enormous hand seemed to be turning him half round and pushing him across the street towards what he knew to be area railings. Then, completely deafened and completely blinded, he felt himself pulled flat on his face.

The blast of the unheard bomb had knocked wind and

senses clean out of him. But his senses began to come back almost at once. Somehow or other, he knew that he was only bruised; and that he would soon be able to hear again. His sight was already clearing. He could just see cloth close in front of his eyes. So he'd put his arm to shield them, had he?

He began to breathe again. Not too painfully. Presently he turned on his side, and rested himself on one elbow. He could see the dim glow of a street lamp now, and his helmet, which lay close beside him. Slowly—but again not too painfully—he hauled himself to his feet, and picked up the helmet. As he did so, hearing returned.

"Help," someone was screaming. "Help!"

He staggered towards the sound; tripped over bricks; felt something sharp jag at his kneecap, another something jag at his right hand as it helped him upright. Meanwhile his left hand was feeling for his torch.

The torch, miraculously still working, showed him a heap of smoking rubble. The voice screamed again. Another voice moaned. He caught a glimpse of a face, and began to tear at the rubble with his naked hands.

Soon, a third voice was saying, "Careful, or you'll have the whole lot down on her." He heard himself ask, "Is that you, padre?"

"Yes. Do you think you could get your shoulder under this beam?"

His senses were dazing again. The whole thing seemed a fantastic nightmare, nothing real about it except the intolerable weight on his shoulder, and the padre's, "It's all right. We'll have you free in half a jiffy." He thought stupidly, "If I don't pass out first."

Then the weight grew a little more tolerable, and he realised that someone else—a woman?—must be helping them. It was a woman—bare-headed, in a short fur, a black and gold frock.

3

For William Wordsworth the following minutes were

mere blurs of effort and sensation; out of which he emerged—abruptly and almost as though someone had dowsed his head with cold water—to find himself looking into known eyes.

"We can't do any more," said a voice, also known, from under those eyes. "The old woman's not too badly hurt, and the girl's all right. If you've a clean handkerchief I'll bandage that hand for you."

He realised that his right hand was bleeding, and that the known voice, the known eyes, were Millicent Ashdown's. While his left hand fumbled for a handkerchief he saw the girl and the woman of whom she must have spoken being helped into a car by the padre.

"So we got them out," he said.

"Two of them. They say there are two more."

She bandaged his hand deftly. He saw several other figures round the heap of rubble. Above and behind the rubble towered half a house, which brought back memories of Ypres. Higher still, stars shone through a fragmentary roof.

"Can't we do any more?" he asked.

"No. They say they'll need a crane."

"How did you come into this?"

"I'd been dining at the Fantastic. I was walking back to my flat when the bomb dropped. There didn't seem to be anybody about. So I ran into that doorway over there, and found a porter. He said he couldn't leave his post. I had my pearls on, and quite a lot of money in my bag. So I told him to look after them for me. I may as well go and see what's happened to them."

The doorway she had indicated was the entrance to Wordsworth's own block of flats.

"I'll come with you," he said; but experienced a little difficulty in keeping up with her because of his knee, which felt rather stiff.

Through the doorway, they came into light. Various people stood near a lift shaft. The lift doors opened; and the porter—a new one—came out of them.

"I left something with you," said Millicent Ashdown, her voice, natural enough while they had been in the street, resuming its studied artificiality. "Can I have them back, please?"

"Certainly, madam."

The porter produced a key from a trouser pocket; went to his counter; lifted the flap, and unlocked a wall cupboard. Millicent Ashdown took a coin from the bag he gave her, asking, "Is there anywhere I could get tidy?"

"How about coming up to my flat?" suggested Wordsworth.

"Thank you"—one hand went to her hair—"I must look a perfect sight."

She gave the porter the coin. He thanked her. A man standing near the lift shaft asked, "What happened? Was anybody hurt?" A woman said, "We've had all our windows broken"; and another woman, "We were jolly lucky not to have been killed."

As he shepherded his companion into the lift, Wordsworth saw that her short fur and the black and gold frock—the same she had worn when he first met her—were torn in several places.

"That was a pretty sporting effort of yours," he said, pressing the button as the door closed.

"Well, I had to do something, didn't I?" She spoke a little irritably, and turned to survey her face in the small mirror fastened to the back of the lift cage. "I certainly do look a sight. I shall have to have my hair washed tomorrow."

The cage stopped with its usual jerk.

"Why are you limping?" she asked as they went along the corridor.

"I hit my knee. At least I imagine I must have. To tell you the truth, I don't remember very much. That bomb bowled me clean over. I must have been out on my feet most of the time."

They reached his own door. He found his key; clicked down the switch; saw that the curtain over his hall window

hung in tatters. Almost immediately, someone below shouted "Lights." He clicked the switch up. Millicent Ashdown said, "Half a minute, I've a torch in my bag." The beam of the torch showed glass littering the carpet and the door of the sitting room wrenched from its lock.

"My bedroom may be all right," said Wordsworth. "It faces the other way. Mind you don't cut your feet on the glass."

The torch beam showed the bedroom door intact, and the curtains undamaged.

"On the stage, this would be a very compromising situation," laughed Millicent Ashdown, as they went in.

Wordsworth, too, laughed. He took off his helmet, wondering how and when it had got back on his head; and felt for his cigarette case. His dirty hand shook a little. Hers, as she picked out a cigarette, was quite steady, though even dirtier.

"Not a bad effort of yours either," she said. "I shall need a manicure as well as a shampoo. And this fur cost me a couple of hundred. You look as if you needed a drink. I could do with one myself."

"If there's any left."

He took the torch from his bedside table, and went to the sitting room. There, also, the curtains hung in tatters; but he could see no glass on the floor, only a mound of soot by the fireplace. The bottle, the syphon and the tumbler on the sideboard were intact.

He made his way to the kitchenette. The tiny window there had not smashed. He took two other tumblers from the cupboard and rinsed them carefully in the lukewarm water from the hot tap. Returning to the bedroom, he found it empty, and the door to his bathroom, ajar when they entered, shut. On his bed lay Millicent Ashdown's fur coat, a lace handkerchief and a string of pearls.

"May as well get a bit tidy myself," he decided, peeling off his heavy coat, stained in several places and with one of its shoulder straps missing. His jacket had not suffered

any damage; but flesh and drying blood showed through the right knee of his trousers. He washed his hands and face at the lavatory basin; slit the torn trouser leg with a penknife; picked a triangular piece of glass from the wound; bathed it, and was just swabbing on the iodine when Millicent Ashdown came back.

"Doesn't that hurt like hell?" she asked.

"It's not too pleasant. Were you cut anywhere?"

"Just a few scratches." She extended a bare arm. "I found some peroxide in there. It's just as good as iodine."

He disputed that; but she countered stubbornly:

"No. I shouldn't get the iodine stains off for a week. How about that drink you promised me?"

"It's behind you. On the dressing table."

She turned her back on him. He finished bandaging his knee. She faced him again, a full glass in each hand; gave him one, saying, "What a party. I was absolutely terrified," and perched herself, one long leg crossed over the other, on the bed.

"You appear to have made this strong enough," said Wordsworth, taking his first sip.

"It's half whiskey and half soda—just about right for the occasion. Drink it down. It'll do you good. What did it feel like when you were knocked over?"

He described some of his sensations.

"You're lucky to be alive," she commented.

"Yes. I suppose I am."

She took a long pull at her glass; and appeared to be reflecting. Warmed by his own drink, he was conscious how attractive she looked with those lustrous eyes and those wide carmine lips, and that silver streak in her blue-black hair, which was still a little dishevelled, almost as though she had been making love. "Just the sort of woman a man might kill for," he caught himself thinking.

She tossed off the rest of her whiskey; uncrossed her legs, and eyed him for a moment, now obviously pensive.

"I ought to be going," she began. "I shall take a sleeping

draught as soon as I get home. You ought to have one, too. But I don't expect you've got anything. There's something I'd like you to do for me."

"I'll do anything I can."

"It isn't very difficult." She was smiling. "I'd like you to lunch with me on Saturday."

"I'm afraid I can't manage Saturday."

"Sunday, then." She was still smiling. "We'll make it any time you like. One. Half past one. Two."

Police habits urged refusal. On the other hand, he might learn something. And she had behaved so well; she looked so damned attractive, with that figure, with those lips half open, showing perfect teeth.

"A quarter past suits me best," he heard himself say. "It's Curzon Mansions, I seem to remember. You'd better let me see you home. We haven't had the all clear yet."

"My dear man, it went while we were washing. And anyway you couldn't possibly come out in those trousers."

"I can change them."

"You'll do nothing of the sort."

She picked up her pearls; and clasped them round her throat at the mirror over the basin. Once again he thought how alluring she was, and how easily a passionate man might be tempted to kill for her. As he helped her into the torn fur, her perfume was a near temptation.

"I'll walk down," she insisted when they were in the corridor. "You go straight to bed—and, whatever you do, don't forget Sunday."

"Some party," thought the ex-chief of police at Cape Remittance just before he fell into a troubled sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I

THAT Friday morning, the ex-chief of police at Cape Remittance woke with a slight headache to confused memories. From his pillow emanated a strange perfume. Surely there hadn't been a woman in his bed. But as he crawled stiffly from between the sheets, his recollection cleared; and, after putting on his dressing gown, he picked up his torch.

Hall and kitchenette were icy, and the water in the hot tap stone cold. He filled his electric kettle, and brewed himself the usual pot of tea. The hot water tap in the bathroom only gurgled air; the cold water tap wouldn't even gurgle.

He shaved with the rest of the water he had boiled for his tea; took fresh underclothes, a clean shirt, and his other uniform from the wardrobe, and was just struggling with the most preposterous collar and tie ever devised for active service, when a servant entered to tell him:

"I'm afraid we shan't be able to manage breakfast this morning, sir, because the gas has conked out."

"That's all right, Mason. I'll get some at the club."

It was still dark when Wordsworth—glad of the civilian stick he had decided necessary after feeling his kneecap—limped out into the street. His club, though near by, had escaped damage. The hall porter called his attention to the shoulder strap missing from his greatcoat; the colonel who breakfasted at the adjoining table said:

"That's a nice bruise you've got on your forehead. Have you been in a scrap?"

Breakfast over, he rewashed his face and hands in hot

water; smoked a cigarette, and sent a page for a taxi. An imitation of daylight broke through foggy darkness as they turned down the Haymarket. The Air Ministry seemed more like a prison than ever. The electric lift was out of order; waiting for the old one, he encountered Miss King, in rubber boots and a red mackintosh.

He said good morning. She said, "You look as if you'd been in an accident, squadron leader."

Answering her lightly, "Oh, we had a spot of frightfulness in my neighbourhood last night," he wondered what on earth Guy could see in the girl. No man in or out of his senses would break even a minor commandment for Miss King.

They parted at the third floor. His way to his own office took him past Quaritch's. The lady secretary in the outer room said, "He isn't here yet. I don't know what his appointments are. You'd better ask Flying Officer Tremlett."

Tremlett, from his desk in the next room, grunted. "He won't be able to see you today. He's got conferences here all the morning, he's lunching with a bunch of foreign attachés, and he'll be at the Admiralty most of the afternoon."

Characteristically, Tremlett neither asked what one wanted to see Quaritch about, nor why one was using a stick.

"I'll look in tomorrow morning," said Wordsworth, glad of the extra twenty-four hours.

Pinned to his desk in his own office he found a scrawl from Conington, "N.'s minute in tray. Also fuze. Hope you enjoyed your trip." He unlocked their cupboard, and spent a quarter of an hour considering Negresco's minute. Boulte had not exaggerated. As a let-out for Negresco, this document was perfection. But could it let Boulte out after Kitchen's evidence? The man was half mad anyway—and he could have gone up that iron staircase outside Ashdown's window without making a sound.

Guy Conington, appearing at a quarter to ten, noticed the

bruise immediately; and, having been told its cause, suggested, "Why don't you go home and take it easy?"

"Because I want to write up my notes."

Wordsworth wrote for the best part of an hour. Just as he was examining the fuze, Staveleigh came to see him; and, after Staveleigh, other visitors. When he and Guy were alone again, he passed his notes across the desk.

"This appears to make Boulte public suspect number one," drawled Connington. "What are you going to do about it?"

"What am I going to do about any of 'em? Don't you see what I'm up against, Guy?"

"You mean that you've got no authority. I've seen that all along. But you're so damned obstinate once you get your teeth into a thing."

"I never did like the idea of a murderer running about loose. Still, it won't do him any harm to run about loose for another few hours. So I think I'll take your advice. Do you happen to know of a good sleeping draught? I had a wicked night."

"Try Sedquik. You don't need a prescription. Where are you lunching?"

"Nowhere in particular."

"Then come along with me to the Press Club, and hear how the war's going. Nobody seems to know anything about it here."

2

The company at lunch had been amusing; and one remark from his Scottish neighbour at the communal table, "There's only one qualification for a government job and that's that you can't do it," was still making its appeal to Wordsworth as he boarded a west-bound bus.

He alighted at Piccadilly Circus; bought a packet of Sedquik; had the missing shoulder strap replaced by his tailor, from whom he ordered another pair of trousers, and arrived home by half past three.

His flat had been roughly cleaned, and brown paper pasted on the empty window frames. But there was no heat in the radiator; and whatever he touched in the sitting room left soot marks on his fingers. While he still wondered what to do about this, the telephone rang. Having given his number he heard Gale's:

"That is you, isn't it, William? Are you all right? I couldn't telephone sooner because I've been busy; and I've had a simply fearful time trying to persuade a gentleman at the Air Ministry with the most beautiful British drawl to give me your number. He said you'd gone home after lunch, and that you were going to take a sleeping draught. I do hope I haven't woken you up."

He told Gale, "I'm all right. I'll be as fit as a fighting cock by tomorrow. Don't forget you're lunching with me."

Gale persisted, "Are you sure you're all right? Are you sure you oughtn't to see a doctor?"

Her anxiety pleased Wordsworth. They exchanged a few more sentences. A thought struck him.

"How did you come to know about this?" he asked.

She kept him waiting a few seconds for his answer.

"I just happened to hear something," she said then. "Or rather to overhear something. I hope that . . . that woman bound up your hand nicely, and that she didn't stay too long. You'll be glad to know she thinks you're very good-looking and that you behaved like a perfect hero. So long, William."

She hung up before he could say another word.

Still pleased at her anxiety, though vaguely annoyed that Millicent Ashdown should have gossiped about him in a beauty parlour, he rang for the chambermaid, and consulted her about the soot.

"I've done the best I can with the Hoover," she said. "There's a man coming to clean tomorrow, I believe. But you'll be lucky if you get your windows back—and the porter thinks there'll be no gas or hot water for at least a week."

He wondered whether it might not be a good idea to live at his club for the next few days; but there seemed to be plenty of cold water, and this decided him against the move. All the same, he'd have to dine at his club, so he might as well go there rightaway.

In the street, he questioned a group of men in berets and stained overalls at work on the bombed house. Only one of them spoke intelligible English. Wordsworth gathered that the bodies of two more women had been extracted from the rubble that morning.

"My women," said his informant, "they all dead. Last May, when the *sale Boche* bombed our village. My children, too. One day, we Belgians pay them back for it. Like this."

The refugee drew his hand across his throat. Wordsworth limped away. This was a lousy war. It ought never to have happened. Why had it happened? Only because our politicians—and those blasted French politicians—hadn't had the brains of rabbits or the guts of lice.

Bitterness increased as he entered his club and stood before the memorial tablet in the hall. Egypt and South Africa. These few names were little more than names to him. But among those hundreds of others—in the book of remembrance, now safely below ground—were many of his own generation, whose lives had been squandered so recklessly, and their self-sacrifices so disgracefully betrayed.

"You're in a nice mood this afternoon," he chided himself, and went to the library, where he ordered tea, and found himself a book, which held his mind fairly steady until it was time for dinner.

Half past eight saw him limping home. Sirens moaned while he was undressing. He cursed them; and poured himself a double dose of Sedquik.

In his bed, still faintly redolent of perfume, he thought, "Lunching with Gale tomorrow, lunching with Millicent the day after," before sleep submerged consciousness in warm waves of calming delight.

CHAPTER TWENTY - ONE

I

FLYING OFFICER TREMLETT'S grunt conveyed a mixture of boredom, hostility and the "Gallio-cared-for-none-of-these-things-unless-they-were-his-own-particular-pigeon" attitude common to the entire directorate.

"I don't know about today either," he began; and Wordsworth experienced some difficulty in restraining himself (Tremlett might be his own age, and famous for his racing yachts, but as a flying officer addressing a squadron leader he ought to stand up and say "sir") when he continued:

"You certainly can't see Quaritch this morning. And he won't be back from lunch till three. What are you in such a hurry to see him about anyway?"

"Group Captain Langfordson told me to report to him."

"Won't Monday do? He's always away on Sunday, you know."

"I'd rather it was today."

"All right. Four o'clock—unless I phone you to the contrary. But I warn you, you'll be lucky if he can give you more than ten minutes."

"Thanks."

Wordsworth, still supporting himself on a stick, went to his own room, which did not appear to have been cleaned, and smelt even fustier than usual; opened the window, and looked up at Big Ben.

This morning, skies were blue and the sun shone. The sleeping draught had cleared his mind. He rang for a messenger, and said, "There's a colleague of yours named Dowdy. He works on the ground floor. Do you think you

could get him to come up and see me for a few minutes?"

"I don't know that I could do that, sir. I know Dowdy. He's a funny chap. He might not take it from me."

"Well, do your best, there's a good fellow."

The messenger went out. Wordsworth, having unlocked the cupboard, waited for the best part of twenty minutes, most of which he spent browsing over his notes. When Dowdy did appear, he seemed rather nervous. Wordsworth told him to sit down. As he did so, Conington opened the door. Him, Wordsworth told, "You might wait outside for a bit, Guy—and I'd rather no one came in."

Sitting, open-legged, one powerful hand on each knee, Albert Dowdy faced the light. His thin lips worked. His watery hazel eyes evaded direct scrutiny.

"I met your son the other day," began Wordsworth. "Did he happen to tell you about it?"

"No. I haven't seen him for the best part of a fortnight. He don't get much leave."

"Lie number one?" wondered Wordsworth. "Surely if his son hadn't told him about our meeting, the chap would have shown more interest, and more surprise?"

He lit a cigarette, meditated a second, and switched his guns to a fresh target.

"What I really wanted to see you for," he went on, "is to run over some of the things you've already told me about Room Twenty Eight. Now, according to you, and it's only fair to say that Pink has told me much the same, Air Vice-Marshall Ashdown had a special lock fitted as soon as he took the room over. When was that?"

"I couldn't say the exact date."

"I'm not asking you for exact dates. Give me some idea."

"About a week before he was killed."

"Less than a week or more than a week?"

"Less, I should say. Call it six days—and you won't be far wrong."

"Very well, Dowdy. We'll accept six days, as a matter of fact that's confirmed by Mr. Blinkhorn. Now from that

time onwards—according to you—nobody except Flying Officer Messiter had access to the room. Is that right?"

Momentarily Dowdy's eyes had lost their nervousness; but his thin lips made a stubborn line across the yellow parchment of his face.

"Is that right?" repeated Wordsworth.

"You can ask Pink if you don't believe me."

"I haven't said that I don't believe you. Now what about the window? There's an iron staircase just outside. Could anyone have got in that way?"

"I couldn't say. Usually the window was kept bolted."

Wordsworth wrote down the answer, and referred to his notes.

"Pink says it was always bolted. But it's easy enough to slip a bolt back from the outside. You only need a knife with a thin blade."

Dowdy's huge haunches shifted, ever so slightly, on the hard wood of his chair. His right hand moved up to his right ear. The first joint of his crooking forefinger covered the tiny lobe and almost the whole of the aural cavity. His son—Wordsworth remembered—had made a similar movement. The family hearing, therefore, must be at least normally acute.

"One more point about the room," he went on, raising his voice a semitone. "How long was it empty between the time Sir George Ramsay moved out and Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown took it over?"

"No time at all. As one moved out, the other moved in.

"And the lock was fitted that same afternoon," added Albert Dowdy, with what seemed almost like a note of triumph.

"So Mr. Blinkhorn told me," continued his interrogator. "And now that's all cleared up we'll come to something quite different. What can you tell me about a young woman who sings at the Silver Cellar Club and goes by the name of Florence Desvoeux?"

If Dowdy hadn't lied in the first instance, this last shot

should have hit him straight between the eyes. But he only shifted on his haunches again, and blinked a little, and drew his thin lips to that stubborn line for another second or so, before he burst out:

"That bitch. I should say I did know her. She's my daughter-in-law."

"So I gathered from your son. And I rather gathered"—Wordsworth, referring to his notes again, made a purposeful pause—"although he didn't actually admit it, that your son knew his wife was, shall we say fairly closely acquainted with Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown. Did your son ever tell you about that, Dowdy?"

The messenger's right hand had returned to his knee. Wordsworth saw it clench, and the hazel eyes blinking furiously. Once more the thin lips worked; and, for several seconds, no sound came through them.

"Well?" he prompted.

The eyes ceased blinking, and stared. Blood suffused them.

"No, he never did," said Albert Dowdy. "All I know is that he's had nothing but trouble with her. Even her own father says she's a proper little tart."

"Lie number two," decided Wordsworth—and told the man he could go.

2

Guy Conington asked, "How do you feel this morning, W. W.? Did the Sedquik do its job all right?"; and, having listened to the new evidence against the Dowdys, "When are you seeing Steve Quaritch?"

"At four."

"How much are you going to tell him?"

"I haven't made up my mind. You've met him, haven't you, Guy?"

"Yes. Socially. He's clever up to a point. Anyway, he's done very well for Steve."

"Meaning?"

"That I should watch my step if I were you. None of the Cape Remittance stuff. You're too inclined to play the bluff Colonial in my opinion, W.W. That's because you were out of England so long. It doesn't pay here. Everybody in this country's been soft-pedalling for the last twenty years——"

"And a nice bloody mess it's got us into."

"Nothing like the mess you'll be in if you upset Steve's applecart. He's like Tony Perelli. He don't want no trouble . . . And now how would it be if we got on with a little work?"

They worked on routine jobs till midday, when they were interrupted by Izod, who announced that he'd just "looked in for a chat." The fuze returned by Negresco still lay on Wordsworth's desk. After some aimless war talk, Izod asked if he might have another look at it.

Handling the split cone of metal, he said, "Negresco's minute seems fairly conclusive. I don't suppose you'll be doing much more about this."

"I'm seeing Quaritch at four o'clock," admitted Wordsworth; and he added, "That'll be about the end of it, I imagine."

"I thought he looked rather pleased at the idea you were going to chuck it," said Conington when they were alone again.

"That's only your imagination, Guy. I was watching him pretty carefully—and he never turned a hair. That chap's tough. He's about a thousand per cent tougher than Boulte. If Boulte did it, and I could go the right way to work, I'd make him confess before I was through with him."

"How?"

"By playing on his vanity. He'd probably tell me, 'All right, Wordsworth. You win. Ashdown killed Derek, so I killed him. You can't call that murder. The swine didn't deserve to live.'"

The last words might have been spoken by Boulte himself.

"What an actor you'd have made, W.W." drawled Con-

ington; and a few moments later he repeated his warning about Quaritch. But by then Wordsworth's eyes were on his wristwatch, and nearly all his thoughts with Gale.

"I may be a little late this afternoon," he said, returning from the washroom and straightening his tie at the mirror, "Don't forget to lock the cupboard."

A taxi was just decanting a brace of air commodores when he emerged into King Charles Street. Very nearly omitting to salute them, he climbed aboard; gave the address of his club, and reached the ladies' room exactly three minutes before Gale.

A bemedalled servant showed her in. He noticed that she wore black town clothes, with a black and white hat, which enhanced the auburn of her hair. She noticed the stick. Her golden brown eyes looked him up and down as they shook hands.

"You didn't tell me the truth," she began. "You said you were quite all right."

"So I am. Except for a few bruises."

"Have you been to the Ministry this morning?"

"Of course I have. And I'm going back there this afternoon."

"Must you? I was rather hoping we could go to a news-reel theatre."

"I'm terribly sorry, but it can't be done."

They sat down on one of the sofas by the window. He ordered their sherries. The big room was empty enough for them to feel alone.

"There's something I think you ought to know," she said, accepting a light for the cigarette he had given her. "After you went the other night, Frank rang me up. He seemed very anxious to find out why you had been to Blessingford."

"And what did you tell him?"

"The official story. He said he found that a little hard to believe. When I asked him why, he said he couldn't tell me over the phone, that it was all very hush hush."

Another couple entered, and seated themselves fairly close. Gale changed the subject immediately. She made him tell her about the rescue from the bombed house. Remembering how she had twice referred to her as "that woman" he said as little about Millicent Ashdown as possible.

"You needn't stall," she broke in. "I admit I don't like her. She's too high hat for my taste. But I'm not—and I never was—jealous of her."

"You've certainly no reason to be."

"Even though you're going to lunch with her tomorrow?"

"How on earth did you find that out?"

"My dear man, you've no idea how much our clients talk at Helen Stannard's. She was having her hair washed in the next cubicle."

The notion "Does Millicent Ashdown know about her and Michael?" crossed Wordsworth's mind. But he did not like to question Gale, especially as they might be overheard; and, at lunch, several tables within earshot were occupied, giving them no chance for private conversation. So perforce they talked war.

An alert sounded as they entered the dining room; but nobody took the slightest notice.

"It's only in government offices," said Wordsworth, "that people dash for the shelters."

"Aren't you going rather bolshie?" suggested Gale.

He thought that over before saying:

"You mustn't take me too seriously. I'm a bit fed up with my job."

"Then why not try for a better one?"

"I'm not a serving officer. They keep the plums for themselves. It was the same last time. Besides, when you're my age, you have to take what you're given."

"You needn't talk as though you had one foot in the grave, William."

He grew aware that he had annoyed her. Memory flashed their last meeting at him—and their last conversation on the telephone. Did she care for him? Obviously. About how

much did she care? Enough for kisses anyway. Why must he go back to the Ministry? Why the hell need he worry about marriage? Ashdown hadn't. She was not an innocent girl.

"You're no age at all," she persisted.

"I'm nearly twenty years older than you are."

That silenced her for a moment or so. When she next spoke he was no longer aware of annoyance, but of a mood more like humility.

"Well, we can't alter that," she said, with the faintest emphasis on "we."

They finished eating, and went into the other room for coffee.

"Was your flat badly damaged?" she asked.

"It's in rather a mess; but thank goodness the bedroom and bathroom weren't touched."

"Do they take care of you properly? Who does your mending and that sort of thing?"

"The valet, I believe. Anyway, it gets done. I'm not a very domesticated animal, Gale."

She looked at him without speaking. He could not read all her thoughts; but experience made the gist of them fairly plain. Memory flung up a picture of another woman who had displayed a similar interest in his domestic arrangements, and a song from the previous war, "Some girl darns his socks." Damn it all, he didn't really want to marry.

"One afternoon when I get a bit straighter," he went on, "you must come and see my quarters. They're really quite cosy. At least I find 'em so."

"But not as cosy as that cottage of yours," thought suggested.

They talked a while longer. Glancing at his wristwatch he saw that it was almost half past two.

"You want to be off," said Gale. "So I mustn't keep you."

"When do we meet again?" he asked.

Once more she looked at him without speaking; but this time he could read her thoughts quite clearly.

"Whenever you like," she said to him—and to herself, feeling that she had given herself away completely, "Lordy, I am a fool."

3

Gale Johnson, having refused a lift in Wordsworth's taxi, walked slowly along Piccadilly, and joined the queue outside the news theatre. Lost in personal thoughts ("He only promised to telephone. If he cared as much as I do, he'd have fixed up something definite"), she was startled by the all clear.

Meanwhile Wordsworth, also lost in personal thoughts, whose crudity made him feel slightly ashamed, reached the Air Ministry, and sat down to draft some kind of a report for Quaritch.

"How do you think that'll do?" he asked Conington, sliding the sheet of foolscap across the desk.

"If you take my advice, you won't make a written report at all. Not unless and until he insists. You'll just give him Negresco's minute. We've only got the one copy, so I'm having Miss King make a couple more for our files. They ought to be done by now."

He picked up the telephone, and gave the number of the typing pool. Simultaneously a bespectacled girl knocked and came in with a wad of typescript, saying:

"Miss King's off till this evening. She couldn't do all your work before she went, so I finished it for her."

When they were alone again, Wordsworth, eyeing the typescript, asked: "When did you go out to lunch, Guy?"

"Oh, I just had a snack at the canteen."

"Did you demand Miss King specially?"

"No. She just happened along."

"I hope you behaved yourself like an officer and a gentleman."

Conington laughed; but refused to be drawn. They checked the copies of the minute, and found three mistakes.

"Your Elsie must have been thinking of her boy friend," chuckled Wordsworth.

"I expect she turned most of the copying over to Miss Giglamps. It's a pity we can't get my Elsie, as you call her, properly attached to us."

"Properly?"

"Oh, shut up, W.W. Who were you lunching with anyway?"

The eternal telephone saved Wordsworth from answering.

"Hallo, Champagne Charlie," Conington heard him say. "Tonight. Yes. Rather. Where shall we meet? You'll pick me up here. Good enough. I'll wait for you." Then the other phone rang, and Tremlett grunted, "Is Wordsworth there? Tell him he's to come along now, please."

"Remember Steve don't want no trouble," repeated Conington as Wordsworth went out.

4

Air Commodore Stephen Quaritch, rising from the big desk by the one window of his overlarge, heavily carpeted room, might have been the original eighteenth-century John Bull, transferred to the twentieth-century R.A.F. His broad chest displayed two and a half rows of medal ribbons. His face, shaved clean to leave just a suspicion of whisker, was florid, wide of brow, and heavy of jowl. Blue eyes, too large for the face, appeared to radiate good fellowship. He offered a vast hand, a chair by the desk, and a fat Turkish cigarette, saying bluffly:

"Sit down, Wordsworth. Let's see—you're one of our Security wallahs, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, never mind the 'sir.' You're an old sweat like myself. When did you get that Military Cross? I got mine after Loos. I was only a flat-footed soldier then. Lousy show. I see you've got the Mons Star. Were you a regular?"

"Yes. I was in the Horse Artillery before I transferred to the R.F.C."

"Did you chuck the service after the war?"

"In nineteen twenty "

"And what did you do with yourself after that?"

Given his answer, Quaritch chuckled, "Hot place, Cape Remittance. In more ways than one. I struck it in nineteen-twelve. Is the Tingel Tangel still going?"

"It was when I left."

Quaritch lit a fresh cigarette from the stump of the old, and asked, "Well, what's the trouble? Can't it wait till Group Captain Dorland comes back?"

"Group Captain Langfordson told me to report to you, sir."

"Oh, I remember now. It was about Ashdown. Langfordson left me a note. He said you'd called in some fellow from the War Office, and that he'd written you a minute. Have you sent it along yet?"

"No, sir. I brought it with me."

"Well, let's have a dekko at it. Where are my glasses? I can't see a thing without 'em."

He found his spectacles, and read the blue paper with care. "He's a bit too friendly," thought Wordsworth. "But whatever else he is, he's no mug."

Both opinions were confirmed by Quaritch's next words:

"This reads a bit like one of those appreciations of the enemy's intentions we used to be set at the Staff College. The main idea, I seem to remember, was to cover oneself against all eventualities. Tell me—as we're both old sweats and you're an ex-policeman—what eventuality were you covering yourself against when you asked this chap to make his investigation?"

Wordsworth hesitated. Quaritch removed his glasses; and the blue marbles of his eyes fairly glistened with bonhomie.

"All I want," he prompted, "is the general idea."

"Well, sir, quite frankly, I've been wondering whether we oughtn't to call in Scotland Yard."

The senior officer, in his turn, hesitated. He resumed his glasses; re-read Negresco's "Conclusion," and took them off again. It seemed to his junior that something of the bonhomie had gone from his eyes. His voice, however, remained friendly enough.

"That's rather a startling suggestion," he said. "I'd like to think it over for a day or two. I'll take this paper home with me and browse on it. Meanwhile, you lie doggo. No names, no pack drill. You follow what I'm driving at?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. You're not looking too fit, you know, Wordsworth. I hope you take your day off regularly. Mine's Sunday. And I stick to it like wax. We old sweats have got to take care of ourselves. You like your job, I hope. We must try to wangle you a bit of promotion one of these days. I'll talk to Group Captain Dorland about that when he comes back."

"Thank you very much, sir."

"Don't thank me. I flatter myself I know a good man when I see one. The trouble in this place is that everyone yaps too much."

The hint was plain. Quaritch, presumably, would hush the thing up if he could. "And it'll pay me to keep in with him," decided Wordsworth, taking his departure from that high room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I

A NIGHT out with Champagne Charlie always had meant a mouth like chewed rag next morning. And this Sunday morning—decided Wordsworth, sipping tea in his icy bedroom—provided no exception to the rule.

One had managed not to get tight, though—and to find one's way to the Silver Cellar when Champagne Charlie, smoking his third cigar, insisted, "What I need now, W.W., old boy, is another nice cold bottle or two, and a nice hot bird."

A crude fellow. But at least he knew what he wanted. And it hadn't taken him more than a couple of dances with her to make up his mind about Flossie. "Thanks for the intro, old boy," Wordsworth remembered him whispering. "Just my cup of tea."

And it hadn't taken Flossie very long to make up her mind either. Shrewd little devil with her, "Don't you worry about getting another girl for Bill. He'll go home all by himself like a good little boy. He's in love. I can always tell when a man's in love. He gets that faraway look in his eyes."

Was he so much in love with Gale, and so hellbent on marrying her, that even a floozy could spot it? Or was he just too old for picking up stray girls in night clubs?

Be damned if he knew.

2

After a hot bath and a late breakfast at his own club, Wordsworth telephoned to Guy Conington, who reported,

"I shall push off about half past twelve. Don't hurry over your lunch. There's absolutely nothing doing"; and settled down to the Sunday papers. At about half past eleven Champagne Charlie rolled in, and demanded:

"A double brandy, W.W., old boy. I'm not as young as I used to be. By the way—I believe I asked you this last night but I'm a bit hazy about it—did you find out what you wanted to know from Pullen's crowd?"

"Yes, thanks. Though they couldn't tell me very much."

"How's the case going generally?"

"It doesn't look as though there was a case. Forget it, will you?"

"Right you are. A nod's as good as a wink to me. Even after I've had a blind. And talking of that, that kid's left me stony broke. Do you think your club would cash a cheque for me?"

Champagne Charlie went off with ten pounds in his wallet, confiding, "And I promised I'd take her out to lunch, too. It's lucky there's no purchase tax on that sort of thing."

At one o'clock Wordsworth also left the club.

3

A slight drizzle was falling—but the distance to go seemed too short for a taxi. Wordsworth had discarded his stick. He walked without limping, and the bruise on his forehead hardly showed. Tomorrow he should be up to driving again. Which night should he run down to Tapworth?

So thinking he reached the main entrance of Curzon Mansions. The porter rang for the lift. Out of it stepped George Ramsay, who said:

"Good morning, Wordsworth. Mrs. Ashdown told me she was expecting you. I've just been having a cocktail with her."

Ramsay, saluted by the chauffeur of a waiting Rolls, stepped in, and was driven away. The lift decanted Wordsworth in front of an elaborate door, which opened almost

before he could ring. A manservant hung up his coat, and ushered him into a long room with three windows through which one could see the traffic moving along Park Lane.

"Mrs. Ashdown won't be many minutes, sir," said the manservant; and withdrew.

Wordsworth inspected the room, luxuriously furnished, with one particularly attractive flower-picture between the brackets on the green wall over the fireplace, in which logs were burning, and vases full of real flowers on the writing desk, on the two walnut lowboys between the windows, and the Japanese lacquer cabinet behind the knole sofa. The only photograph—that also on the writing desk—was an enlarged snapshot of Millicent Ashdown and George Ramsay, in full hunting rig, mounted on the kind of horses one had never been able to afford.

Before he could inspect the photograph more closely, Millicent came in; and, once again, as she held out her right hand, he was aware of her full attraction.

"We're all alone," she began. "George was here just now. But he couldn't stay. And the other woman who was coming has just telephoned to say her husband has turned up on leave, without letting her know. Do you mind terribly?"

"Fiction," decided Wordsworth. "But we'll let it pass."

The manservant entered with various drinks.

"Sherry, whiskey or a bronx?" asked Millicent.

"Which are you having?"

"A bronx, I think."

"Then I'll have a bronx, too."

She curled herself in a corner of the knole sofa, and indicated that he should sit beside her. She wore no hat, and her arms were bare. He could see no marks on either of them; nor on her hands.

"I'm one of those lucky people who heal very quickly," she said; and he decided to be more careful with his eyes, because she had read his thoughts so easily.

"Your hand's healed up nicely, too," she went on. "How's the leg?"

He caught himself approving her dark red house dress; and, more especially, her sheer-stockinged knees. Nice ankles she had, too. She asked him, "Do you hunt?" and, hearing that he did, talked horses and hounds till the manservant came in to tell them that lunch was ready.

During an excellent meal, with which she insisted on his drinking a nicely warmed Burgundy, he realised that she was laying herself out to please.

"When this filthy war's over," she said, "you really must try one season in Leicestershire."

"I'm afraid the Shires are a bit above my income."

"I don't expect we'll any of us have an income by the time Little Sir Echo's finished with us."

"Little Sir Echo?"

"Kingsley Wood. George nicknamed him that when he was Air Minister. Do you know Archie Sinclair? George's nickname for him is the Laird of the Air. Of course George knows everybody."

She stopped, obviously to let the information register. The manservant cleared the table, and brought in coffee.

"A cigar, sir?" he asked, proffering a large box on a silver salver.

"And a little brandy," tempted Millicent.

Wordsworth took a cigar. The manservant poured him a brandy; and left them alone.

"You're not in a hurry, I hope," began Ashdown's widow.

"No. Sunday's always pretty quiet. I needn't be back before three."

"Good. I've got to go out about then. I'll drive you down to the Ministry. Do you mind if I'm thoroughly indiscreet? I'm rather given that way, George tells me."

She paused. Very much on his guard, Wordsworth did not answer.

"George agrees with you about my husband's death," she said abruptly. "But he thinks it better to let sleeping dogs lie. He told you so, I believe."

"He seems to tell her most things," thought Wordsworth, nodding his affirmative.

"Well, I think George is wrong."

She paused again, and leaned forward a little, making play with her eyes.

"I've a strong personal reason," she went on, "for wanting this thing cleared up. That's why I told you what I did about Boulte. He did threaten to shoot Marcus. It happened one afternoon—while we were at Blessingford. Marcus told me about it the same evening."

Obviously meant to say something, Wordsworth said:

"But you don't know what they quarrelled about."

"As a matter of fact, I do. Shall I tell you?"

"Please."

Millicent Ashdown's story, though not nearly so detailed, was the same as Kitchin's. It seemed the moment for a little brutality.

"Do you mind if I put rather an indiscreet question?" asked Wordsworth.

"My dear man, you can ask me anything you like. All I want is to get this mystery cleared up."

"Quite so." He chose his words carefully. "And you say you have a strong personal reason. Can I be told that reason?"

"Isn't it"—she expelled a slow puff of cigarette smoke through half open lips—"tolerably obvious?"

"Perhaps I'm rather dense."

"I should say that's the last thing you are."

Once again, she leaned towards him, making play with her eyes.

"Supposing," she went on—and obviously she, in her turn, was choosing each word with the greatest care—"that you were a woman whose husband had been murdered, and that the murderer was never discovered, wouldn't you feel a little . . . a little chary about taking another one?"

Their eyes clashed.

"That would depend," he shot at her.

"What on?" she shot back.

"Circumstances."

"Such as?"

"Time, for instance. If I wanted to marry again within a few months of my husband's death——"

"And you pretend to be dense," she interrupted.

Her eyes, now, showed wide open admiration. His right hand rested on the table; she covered it with her left.

"I made a mistake when I married Marcus," she said. "I was going to divorce him anyway. I had plenty of evidence. After the first six months he never even pretended to be faithful. He'd had a child by another woman, too."

"Did he tell you that himself?"

The question escaped Wordsworth before he could check his tongue. He felt his hand growing hot under hers; wondered if she could be sensing his perturbation.

"No," she said quietly. "My solicitors found it out. We didn't mean to use it, of course. Except to bring pressure on him. You see, he didn't want to be divorced. Not till after the war anyway. He said it would interfere with his promotion. That was the only reason—they hadn't got a scrap of evidence—why his solicitors filed a cross-petition."

She removed her hand, lifting it to glance at the tiny wristwatch she was wearing.

"Do you know what the time is?" she asked. "Ten to three already. I must go and powder my nose or we shall both be late. Wait for me here, will you?"

Waiting, he speculated about her. Why had she been so frank. Obviously because—with the thing already on the file—she couldn't hope to conceal the corespondent named in Ashdown's cross-petition, who must be George Ramsay. What was Ramsay playing at, though? And why—why on earth—had Millicent made it so clear that she knew about Gale and Michael?

He was still brooding on the answer to that last question—angrily, because it annoyed him that anyone except himself should know about Gale and Michael—when she came back,

wearing another of those absurd little hats and a long fur coat that must have cost hundreds, to say, "Let's get a move on, shall we? The car's here."

In the car—the same Rolls which Ramsay had used—she said very little until that final:

"I've told you everything I can think of. But if there's any other question you want to ask, do ring me up. I'm nearly always at home about half past five. And please don't tell George—or anyone else—how indiscreet I've been."

"Or anyone else!" thought Wordsworth, watching the long car back out under the archway. "Now what the devil did she mean by that?"

Remembering how they had met at Helen Stannard's, however, and her, "I suppose I oughtn't to ask what brings you here—it's too obvious. Well—good hunting," the answer to that question seemed plain enough.

4

For weeks now Guy Conington, whose dislike of civil service methods verged on mania, had been trying to obtain a copy of an anonymous poem entitled "Sniff," commonly attributed to a certain member of "Robertson's Horse," Fleet Street's nickname for the thirty-odd R.A.F. war correspondents attached to Press Section.

Wordsworth found the long-sought parody, on which Guy's blue pencil had scrawled the one word "Eureka!" pinned to his desk; and read:

SNIFF

If you can't peep ahead or even about you,
Or use your wits as common folk must do;
If you can't trust yourself, and most men doubt you,
And there's a reason for their doubting too;
If you were born too tired to earn your living,
Or, knowing the whole facts, prefer half-lies,
Or, constitutional taker, shrink from giving,
And yet can talk that good and look that wise:

If you can't think—and precedent's your master;
If you can't dream that life's a soldier's game;
If War won't make you move one knot the faster,
And overtime's the only treat you claim;
If you can't bear strict orders straightly spoken;
If all you're built for is an office stool—
Worn-out and stooping, soft-skinned for a token
You're one tenth twister and nine tenths the fool:

If you won't leap, however long your looking,
And hate all chaps in blue or khaki cloth,
And never breathe the word, when ten are cooking,
That one can brew a cheaper, stronger broth;
If you've no nous, no go, no guts inside you
Except to wait your turn—and then hold down,
Until short years with pensioned ease provide you,
The cushy job of Hob, Nob, Dobb or Brown;

If you daren't mount the clouds, or keep sea-station,
If handling Bren guns hurts you overmuch,
If all you know about administration
Is how to muck-up everything you touch:
If you can merely fill the unfiled minute
To pass and pass and pass till Kingdom Come,
Yours is the *Civil* Service. Up, and in it,
And snitch one K.B.E.* the more, you bum!

"Clever," he thought, chuckling a little. "Not quite fair though. And if Guy leaves this lying about for some tetchy higher clerical officer to see we may have another murder on our hands."

The word "murder" wrenched his mind back to its immediate problem. Taxing his memory, he managed to add his conversation with Millicent, almost verbatim, to the rest of his notes.

"Quite a dossier," he thought next. "And yet, how far does it get me? Motive, motive everywhere. But not one

* Knighthood of the British Empire.

scrap of evidence to indicate who planted that phony shell in Ashdown's locker. And no way of getting any evidence. Unless. . . ."

Once again, that vague idea which he had twice discarded as too melodramatic crossed his mind; and he played with it for a while, realising it—from the personal viewpoint—more satisfactory than any of his others. It would let Gale out anyway.

But the mere thought of Gale set his hand grasping for the telephone.

"Service call?" asked the operator.

"No. Personal. Squadron Leader Wordsworth. Will it take long?"

"I'll do my best for you."

He recradled the instrument. Waiting—five, ten, fifteen minutes—he forgot his secondary problem, and considered only his main one. Because after all Gale was his main problem. Did he, or did he not, intend asking her to marry him? With no Michael in the background (or should it be foreground?) he might not have hesitated. But could one play the father to Ashdown's child?

The bell rang at last. "Your call to Tapworth," said the operator. Once more conscious of excitement, he waited for Gale's "Hallo," only to hear Michael's treble, "Who is it? Mummy's in the garden. I'll go and get her."

Waiting again, he thought, "Jolly little chap. Later on, he'll need a man to look after him."

"This is Mrs. Johnson speaking," said Gale's voice over the wire. "Who are you?"

"William."

"How nice of you to ring up. I hope you enjoyed your lunch party. Was it a tête-à-tête?"

"Actually it was."

"How interesting for you."

Her attitude intrigued him. Did the chaff conceal jealousy?

"Not as interesting as all that," he chaffed back. "If you'd

care to have a report of our conversation, I might be able to supply you with one."

"Somebody once told me that what the soldier said isn't evidence."

"Then I'll have it typewritten for you. Gale——"

"Yes, William."

"When are you coming to inspect my quarters?"

"I wouldn't know about that."

"Could we make it Tuesday afternoon?"

"I shouldn't think so. We're rather busy next week."

Her reluctance (was she only pretending?) increased his sudden determination.

"But I must see you again soon, Gale."

The wire went silent on him.

"It doesn't sound as though you were very busy," she said after a considerable while.

"We're entitled to one day off a week."

"Well, I'll think it over. William——"

"Yes, Gale."

"I wonder whether we ought to see each other again. It doesn't seem very sensible."

"I don't understand."

"Oh, yes, you do, William. We're both grown up, and we're neither of us exactly morons."

Again the wire went silent. When she next spoke, she was at her most serious.

"What you've got to understand," she said, "what we both have to understand, is that I haven't only myself to consider."

"But I do understand that."

"Then hadn't you better think it over, too, William?"

She clicked off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I

AT about three o'clock on that same Sunday afternoon Guy Conington drawled to the synthetic redhead who had been the object of his affections for two years, "I'm not in the least sore, Dolly. I quite realise I'm no good to you on twopence a week without a flat of my own or even a car. So what happens?"

"We just part and stay good pals," said Dolly. "It's been fun while it lasted. My God, what wouldn't I give for another Christmas at Saint Moritz."

"And another Easter at Le Touquet."

Sick for the old days, they looked at each other. Then Dolly looked at the sunray clock on the restaurant wall.

"I think I'll have to go now."

"Then we'll charter a taxi. Don't worry. I shan't ask to come in with you."

He winked at her. She lowered her eyes and said:

"You always were a bit too clever for me, Guy. It's a pity you're so broke. But it's your own fault. You should have stuck to your job. After all, somebody's got to give me a good time. Because that's all I'm fit for. You can't imagine me in uniform."

"Hardly. Step-ins and a brassière are your fighting kit."

"You needn't be coarse, my sweet."

"Sorry. Let's toddle. Page!"

The page boy went for a taxi.

"Our last ride together," drawled Guy, as they set off. "It started this way, if you remember."

"The night Chamberlain came back from Munich. Do you

remember how pepped up we were? Oh, Guy, how absolutely bloody everything is. Sometimes I don't think I can stick it."

"My dear Dolly, we've damn well got to stick it."

"Yes, I suppose so."

She took a compact he had given her from her bag, and busied herself with her face. "Just as well we're chucking it," he thought. "She always glooms nowadays—except when she's a bit tight."

Yet when it came to saying, "Well, goodbye, Dolly. Have the best time you can—and let's hear from you occasionally," sentiment had its way with him, and his defeatist mood almost matched hers.

He watched her disappear into the eight-storeyed steel and concrete building in St. John's Wood, to which she had moved when bombing began; paid off his taxi, and walked aimlessly down the hill.

"They used to talk about the lost generation after the last war," he thought. "But what about us—too young to volunteer for a fighting job last time, too old this."

2

A sudden spatter of rain drove Conington into a doorway. He felt for his gold cigarette case, only to remember that he had no matches. The rain stopped. He walked on again, still aimlessly, past the shuttered shops of a main road. A middle-aged man in shabby civilian clothes came towards him.

"I beg your pardon," said Conington when they were abreast of each other, "but could you oblige me with a light?"

"A light. That is a match—yes. No. I am the non-smoker. But there a café round the corner is. They, perhaps, the matches sell."

"Thank you."

"Do not mention it."

The man, who spoke with an unmistakable German accent, raised his hat, and walked on. Conington turned the corner, and saw a sign, "Snack Bar. Open." Pushing his way through

the door on which the sign hung, he found himself facing a long counter with seats that reminded him of the American drug stores seen on the films.

Two girls stood behind the counter. Except for them, the place was empty.

"Nasty day," said one of the girls. "What can I serve you with?"

"Well, I only came in for some matches, really. But if you've any tea——"

"Tea or coffee."

"Make it coffee then, Jean."

"My name isn't Jean. It's Moira."

The girl, a brunette with rather nice eyes, smiled at him. He unbelted his greatcoat, and straddled a stool.

"My friend's in the R.A.F.," she confided, giving him matches and sifting sugar into his coffee. "He's a sergeant pilot. I think you flying boys are all simply too marvellous."

Her words hurt.

"You flatter me, my dear," he drawled. "I'm not a boy, and I don't fly."

"Well, I'm sure you don't look more than a boy," said Moira brightly; but it was obvious that she had lost interest; and after another sentence or so she took cover behind the coffee urn. Her colleague picked up a book.

At that moment, the door opened again, and a third girl, bare-headed, carrying a small umbrella, and wearing smart blue slacks under a transparent red mackintosh, said, "Hallo, we are empty this afternoon."

As Moira, still behind her urn, retorted. "You're half an hour earlier than usual, Elsie," Conington, who had been daydreaming, recognised the newcomer.

Recognition appeared to have been simultaneous. Obviously surprised, she only just smiled at him. He slipped from his stool, and held out his hand, drawling:

"My dear Miss King. How extremely pleasant to see you."

After a second's hesitation, she held out her hand, which felt rather cold.

"What on earth are you doing in Maida Vale, flight lieutenant?" she asked.

"Just having a cup of coffee and a cigarette. Won't you join me—as we seem to be the only customers?"

"Actually, I don't drink coffee."

"Then how about a nice cup of tea?"

"I'd rather have a glass of Horlick's."

He relieved her of her umbrella. She perched herself on the neighbouring stool. What a contrast she made to Dolly, this fresh-faced blond without a scrap of make-up, who worked so hard for such meagre wages.

"I gather you're a regular customer, Miss King."

"Yes. I live just opposite, flight lieutenant."

So that big building he could just remember having noticed as he turned the corner was St. Catherine's Court.

"All alone?" he asked.

She turned on her stool, and eyed him—rather suspiciously, he thought—before she answered:

"Oh, I've got heaps of friends in the building. We sleep in the shelter since the blitz started."

"Is it a comfortable shelter?"

"Yes. We each have a bunk. It's much more comfortable than sleeping at the Ministry."

"How often do you have to do that?"

"One night in four, actually."

Pity she kept on saying "actually." Still, that was much better than "ever so." Rather a nice voice. Nicer than Dolly's. And she spoke French. A bit of German, too. A better educated girl than Dolly.

"I was sleeping there the night poor Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown was killed," added Elsie King. "Isn't this war terrible? Still, we've got to beat the Nazis. Don't you hate them?"

"I'm afraid I'm not a very good hater."

"Aren't you? I am." She turned to him again. For the first time he saw real animation in her blue eyes.

"But hate's so wearing. It gives one indigestion, too."

"You are funny, flight lieutenant." And, for the first time, he saw her laugh.

"Must you call me flight lieutenant?" he went on. "It's so frightfully formal."

"Well, I can't call you Mr. Conington."

"How about Guy?"

"Oh, I couldn't."

"Why couldn't you—Elsie?"

That time, the look in her eyes baffled him. He remembered Wordsworth's, "If you try to indulge your amorous propensities with that bint, you'll probably get a sock on the jaw." Still, there was never any harm in trying.

"Why couldn't you?" he persisted; and, breaking into French, which he spoke with considerable fluency, "As a journalist I've absolutely no use for the formalities."

She answered in the same language, "But now you are no longer a journalist, you are an officer."

"Only a Woolworth officer."

"Un officier de la maison Woolworth. Oh, là là. Comme vous êtes drôle, Guy."

"Alors. Ça va pour les prénoms, Elsie."

"But not when we are at the Ministry, not in front of the Squadron Leader Wordsworth. I do not like him, that one."

"Why not?"

"I just don't like him," she repeated, still in French, and shrugging her square shoulders. "But you mustn't tell him so, please."

"I shan't tell him anything."

"Bon!"

3

Several other people had entered while Guy Conington and Elsie King were talking French. Presently she introduced him to, "Mrs. Richardson. She lives on the same floor as I do," and, "Miss Carter. Miss Carter's at the War Office."

"And am I glad it's my Sunday away from the War Of-

fice," said Miss Carter, a tiny young woman who looked as though she had gipsy blood in her veins. "Believe it or not, I've been asleep the whole day. Are there any eggs, Moira?"

"Eggs! Where do you think you are, the Ritz? But I can warm up one of these sausage rolls for you."

Mrs. Richardson, who was approaching middle-age, said primly:

"I'll have a pot of tea and a jam puff, dear."

Conington, glancing surreptitiously at his gold wristwatch, saw that it was past four o'clock. He wondered whether he ought to go, but determined to stay.

"Won't you have something to eat?" he asked Elsie. "One of those sandwiches perhaps?"

"Actually"—they were speaking English again—"I was just going to take a sandwich. But I don't see why you should pay for it."

"Well, of course, if you insist on being proud."

After a tiny wrangle—which made him once more contrast her with Dolly, who had always "borrowed" her shilling for the cloakroom—she accepted two sandwiches and another glass of Horlick's; but refused a cigarette afterwards, saying, "Thank you. But I never smoke."

Mrs. Richardson said, "We mustn't forget we're playing table tennis at a quarter to five, Miss King. Miss King's our champion, Flight Lieutenant Conington."

"Really. I'd like to see her play."

"Then why don't you come back with us?"

"Yes. Why don't you?" chorused Miss Carter.

He looked at Elsie, expecting her to dissuade him. But she only smiled, "I'm afraid you'll be rather disappointed"; and soon they were in the street together. He meditated taking her arm; but decided she might not like him to do so before the others. Sufficient unto the day was the progress thereof. "Where did you learn to speak such marvellous French?" he asked.

"In Paris, actually."

"Were you there long?"

"Yes. Five years. I was with a travel agency. I only came back to England in April."

"You got out just in time."

"Yes. Didn't I?"

They were in the hall of St. Catherine's Court by then. Mrs. Richardson led along a passage towards a door marked "Recreation Room."

The room was long, narrow, not too well lit, and bare of floor. Two dark-headed unhappy-looking youngsters, a boy and a girl, stood by a dart board.

"Jews," whispered Elsie. "This place is full of them. I don't know why I stay on."

The words grated on Conington, who, despite his straw-coloured hair, had a mixture of Hebrew blood. He experienced a touch of revulsion; but this passed almost at once.

Two men and three more girls were introduced when they reached the end of the room and the green tables.

"It's the demi-semi-final," explained Miss Carter. "But Elsie's sure to win."

Meanwhile Elsie had peeled off her red mackintosh, and was practising with one of the men. Involuntarily Conington compared the figure she cut in her blue slacks and jumper with Dolly's. The girl had health, and athletic grace—and a top-spin forehand drive he judged almost up to championship form. But when play started, the man gave her quite a game, which she only won by the narrowest margin.

The pair shook hands. She came over, and seated herself beside him on the hard wooden bench.

"I'll have to be going soon," he said. "It's almost blackout time."

She answered in French, "Le Commandant Boulte—what a type, that one—calls it 'le blackoutage.' A good name, I think."

"So you know Boulte."

"*Mais oui*. We met in Paris. Before the war. He used to come to the travel agency where I worked. He looks so funny *en civile*. Not at all distinguished."

"This is news," Conington told himself. Aloud he asked: "Do you know Major Boulte well?"

"Not very. But once, in Paris, he took me out to dinner. That was after war broke out, though. So he was in uniform."

"I hope he gave you a good dinner."

"Excellent. But afterwards"—she stopped, and distaste wrinkled her strong mouth—"afterwards he did not behave like a gentleman. So nowadays we pretend we do not know each other."

A game finished, and another opponent—a girl in gray flannel trousers—claimed her. She knocked the girl's head off inside eight minutes.

"I don't think you should stay any longer," she said in a low voice, returning and leaning over the bench. "I feel sure there'll be a raid tonight. Besides, everybody here gossips so much."

"But we shall meet again, Elsie?"

"Of course. In the Ministry."

"I didn't mean that. Couldn't you lunch with me one day?"

"Perhaps—Guy."

She smiled at him, and held out her hand. He shook hands with Mrs. Richardson also, but not with Miss Carter, who was in the middle of a game.

4

Shouting to a taximan who happened to be driving by, Guy Conington thought, "Off with the old love and on with the new. But I'll have to go pussyfoot. Damn it all, why did I give up my own flat?"

And, lying awake to intermittent gunfire, he once more contrasted Elsie with Dolly, entirely to Elsie's advantage.

Elsie had so many advantages, including . . .

" . . . *nouveau courage*," thought Guy Conington just before he fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I

"THEN hadn't you better think it over, William?"

Gale's admonition reiterated itself in Wordsworth's mind while he brewed his tea on the Monday morning. And, "She's damn right," he decided. "We're both grown up and we're neither of us morons."

Then, involuntarily, he began to think about the war. This was the world's lousiest war. We should win it of course. We always did win our wars. But without American help we could never win decisively. And by the time we'd finished, we should be dead broke.

"So why marry?" asked thought, returning like a boomerang to its original objective. "Why take on a double responsibility?" For obviously, if one married her, one couldn't allow Gale to go on working at Helen Stannard's. And there might be other children besides Michael.

He finished his tea; smoked his first cigarette; shaved; took his cold bath, and dressed. The gas had come back. His sitting room, though draughty, was tolerably clean. He breakfasted; and went to the garage.

There, thought boomeranged again. Minnie Mouse didn't cost much to run. But could one afford to keep a car and a wife and Michael? And how about one's little bit of hunting, one's little bit of shooting, one's little bit of fishing? Damn it all, when peace came—and it must come eventually—one would only have one's pension, and some fifty pounds a year from Cape Remittance Consolidated. So what the hell?

"Might get a job," he meditated as he drove down St.

James' Street. "Secretaryship of a golf club, perhaps. Or a land agency." And so meditating he realised that all his previous thoughts about matrimony had been purely abstract except for the proviso, "She'll have to have a bit of money of her own."

Driving into the Foreign Office courtyard ten minutes later than usual, he parked alongside a car which seemed familiar, and over whose engine—only fieldboots and back-side visible—stooped a figure even more familiar, Boulte's.

Boulte straightened up; turned round, and said:

"Morning, Wordsworth. There's something wrong with my philoprogenitive carburetter. And the starter's out of action, too. Do you mind switching on for me? I'm going to give her a swing."

"Like his nerve," thought Wordsworth; but it seemed churlish not to help; and, doing so, he realised just how foul Boulte's temper could be once fully roused. For, after some twenty fruitless churnings, Boulte wrenched out the handle, and let drive at the stone-guard which protected the car's radiator, screaming, "God damn and blast the thing," as steel crashed against steel.

Simultaneously, his monocle fell from his eye. But this, for some obscure reason, calmed him. Still holding the handle like a flail, he looked down at the fragments into which the glass had broken, trod them slowly to powder; felt in the ticket pocket of his khaki jacket with his free hand—and produced a fresh monocle, which he screwed into his eye socket, quoting, "*Voilà l'espèce d'homme que je suis.*"

While Wordsworth was trying to recollect the source of the quotation, Boulte restored the handle to its clip, and closed up the engine.

"My garage'll have to send along and fix it," he went on; and looking at Wordsworth's car, "Ha. *La piccola topolina.*"

"And what might that mean?"

"*Topolino* is the Italian for Mickey Mouse. That's what they call the things in Dagoland. *Topolina* is the feminine, of course. Don't you speak any foreign language, Wordsworth?"

The sneer had returned to Boulte's lips. "The blighter really does want a kick in the pants," thought Wordsworth, as he answered:

"I only speak Arabic, Urdu and two or three African dialects you've probably never even heard of."

"That's why they haven't sent you to the Middle East, I expect," sneered Boulte.

He picked up his stick and gloves from the running board of his car. Perforce Wordsworth accompanied him out of the courtyard, across King Charles Street, and into the Air Ministry, thinking, "If this were Cape Remittance, I'd put you through it right away."

2

As usual, Guy had not arrived. Most unusually, a charwoman was washing the bare linoleum of their room.

"I've just about finished," she said as Wordsworth entered. "This place gives me the fair sick."

She went out still grumbling. He unlocked the cabinet and took out a well-filled cardboard "jacket" marked "Secret," which had been brought to him just after his unsatisfactory telephone talk with Gale.

The jacket—its original minute by Daddy Dorland—had been circulating from department to department and from section to section for the best part of two months. On the last of the long blue pages was scrawled "50. A.I.27b. Reference 33 (yours) and 41 (mine) please read 42, 43, 47 and especially 48 carefully. I adhere to my original contention. The secrecy of papers entrusted to the typing pool can be vouched for. The selection of civilian personnel is and must remain under the sole control of the competent department (see 34). Kindly inform Group Captain Dorland to this effect."

Writing, "51. G/Cpt.Dorland. Passed to you as requested," Wordsworth thought. "This'll make Daddy as mad as a March hare. For once, though, he's jolly well right."

The door opened while Wordsworth was signing his name.

He looked up and said, "Hallo, Guy. You're looking rather pleased with yourself this morning."

"And with reason," thought Guy Conington—but remembering Elsie's, "I just don't like him," decided to keep their meeting to himself.

"I can't say I feel particularly bright," he prevaricated. "Any news from Steve?"

"No."

"Did you get anything out of Millicent Ashdown, W.W.?"

"Only that she's very anxious to have the whole thing cleared up."

"Did she say why?"

"You'd better read what she said for yourself, then you'll know as much about it as I do."

Wordsworth passed his notes across the desk. An idea struck him. He picked up the telephone; asked for Ministry of Supply, and was finally put through to Artemus Atkinson, who boomed:

"I'm just going away, and I shall be away for the rest of the week. But if you can come along at once I'll see you."

"Right," said Wordsworth; and with the customary, "Hold the fort, Guy," returned to the courtyard of the Foreign Office, where he found Boulte again, talking to a mechanic, who had just dismounted from a motorcycle.

"Whither away?" asked Boulte.

"I'm going to see a man about a dog."

"Meaning that I'm to mind my own damn business."

"If you like to take it that way."

"You'd better mind your business, Wordsworth. Or you'll be clapping the handcuffs on the wrong man."

Boulte spoke his last sentence in a whisper, so that the mechanic should not overhear. Driving off, Wordsworth considered its meaning, and wondered why the man always irritated him so intensely. He was a figure of fun, really. Look at the way he'd lashed out with that starting handle. Had a man with a temper like that enough selfcontrol to plan

a subtle murder? But Izod might have planned it. Izod had enough selfcontrol for two.

Two fresh bomb craters blocked Minnie Mouse's way to the Ministry of Supply building. The janitor made Wordsworth sign a pass. By the time he reached Atkinson's room, the tubby little professor with the crab-apple face and the hawk's eyes was already locking the full dispatch case on his desk.

"I thought you weren't going to eventuate," he boomed, hauling out his watch. "I can only manage about five minutes. What's the trouble?"

"Five minutes will be ample," said Wordsworth. "I only wanted to ask you one question."

"All right. Ask it." The professor, still standing, returned the key of the dispatch case to his pocket.

Wordsworth, also on his feet, continued:

"I gathered, at the conference we had, that you're an expert on time-bomb fuzes. What I'm anxious to discover is the maximum delay action."

He stressed the last two words. Artemus Atkinson blinked at him.

"You'll have to elaborate that, young man," he countered, after an appreciable pause; and he added, after another pause, "Am I intended to gather that you disagree with Major Negresco's conclusions, or is the question purely academic?"

Wordsworth thought for a moment.

"Let's say it's academic," he began suavely. "Let us admit—just for the sake of argument—that Negresco's conclusion might have been"—he fumbled for his next phrases—"considerably more conclusive. How long, in that case——"

"Which is purely hypothetical," interrupted the professor.

"Which is pure hypothesis," paraphrased Wordsworth; and the professor blinked again as he resumed:

"How long, in that case, could the action of the bomb fuze which was substituted for the original shell fuze have been delayed?"

3

Artemus Atkinson's answer had been prolix; and—or so it seemed to Wordsworth as he drove back to the Air Ministry—deliberately evasive. Theoretically, one could design a fuze which would not detonate its charge for an almost indefinite period, say a year. From a practical viewpoint, however, the delay depended upon many factors. The size of the fuze, for instance. Experience tended to prove that a delay of ninety-six hours was the feasible maximum.

"Feasible fiddlesticks," fumed Wordsworth. "There's no change to be got out of that merchant. He's a pal of Ramsay's too. And ninety-six hours would let Ramsay out nicely, because he'd had no access to the room—according to Blinkhorn, Pink and Dowdy—for six whole days."

As he dismounted from Minnie Mouse, he saw the young mechanic fixing a new Bendix pinion to the starter of Boulte's car.

"The major's just gone off to the Dive Bar," said the mechanic. "He told me to tell you, and to say he'd be glad for you to join him."

"Tell him I'm sorry, but I've got some work to do."

"Okay."

The youth in the overalls resumed his work. A hatless girl with auburn hair appeared at one of the entrances to the Foreign Office; and, just for the split of a second, Wordsworth imagined that she was Gale.

This momentary illusion—except for the colour of her hair the girl no more resembled Gale than she resembled the Venus of Milo—jerked the whole of his mind back to personal problems. It even seemed to have affected his memory when, crossing King Charles Street, he came face to face with a young flying officer who saluted him, and stopped.

"Let's see, Messiter isn't it?" he said, slowly.

"Yes, sir."

"Where were you all last week?" Memory was functioning

again. "I tried to find you several times, but nobody seemed to know anything about you."

"I've been ill, sir."

"Well, there are one or two questions I'd like to ask you. So come along."

Messiter, his eyes as scary as ever, seemed to hesitate; but eventually he followed Wordsworth into the Ministry, and up to his room, which was empty.

"Take a pew," said Wordsworth. "Have a cigarette, won't you? What's been the matter? Nothing serious, I hope."

"I've had this beastly gastric flu. My doctor doesn't want me to smoke. Still, I don't suppose one would hurt me."

As the boy lit up, he coughed, reminding Wordsworth of another boy he had known, with this same high-pitched, almost girlish voice. That boy, too, had coughed to the first whiff of a cigarette one had given him—and crashed to his death, on dawn patrol, within the hour. "Ashdown's doing," he recollected. "Brumfit ought never to have been sent up on that patrol. He ought to have been given sick leave"; and, remembering his own longago anger, he experienced a sudden sympathy for Boulte.

"I don't want to worry you when you're not fit, Messiter," he began. "But I must ask you to check a few dates for me if you possibly can."

He referred to his notes; the boy to a pocket diary he carried. "Yes," said the boy in answer to each question, "yes, sir"; and—his evidence confirming Blinkhorn's, Pink's and Dowdy's—Wordsworth asked:

"I can take it then that you and Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown occupied Room Twenty Eight for six days; and that, during that time, nobody could possibly have entered it without one or the other of you knowing?"

"Yes, sir. Unless, of course, they got in through the window. I did that once myself, sir."

"When? And why?"

The boy couldn't remember when. On the Friday or the

Saturday, he thought. But his reason for entering by the window sounded plausible. There was only one key, and "Marcus had forgotten to let me have it."

"Did you have any difficulty in undoing the latch?"

"No, sir. Anybody could have done it with a penknife."

"Do you happen to know if anybody else actually did do it?"

"Yes, the messenger did."

"You mean Dowdy?"

"I don't know his name. He's an oldish man, rather bald."

"You're sure about that?"

"Absolutely. It was the day after we took over the room, when he found out what Marcus had had done to the door. He kicked up a row with me about it, and asked if I didn't trust him. I told him not to be a fool. He went straight out, slamming the door. About five minutes afterwards he knocked on the window and grinned at me. Then he slipped back the catch—just the same way I did—with a penknife, and climbed in over the sill. 'That'll teach you and your precious master whether I'm to be trusted,' he said. 'And you can tell him so with my compliments.' But of course I didn't tell Marcus."

"Why not?"

"Well, it would only have made him wild. And anyway it didn't matter because we always kept everything locked up."

"I see."

Wordsworth, jotting down rough notes, felt Messiter's scary eyes fixed on the paper; and sensed how the questions had excited his curiosity.

"Excuse me, sir," he began, when the notes were finished, "but I should like to know——"

"The less you know the better," snapped Wordsworth. "And don't repeat this conversation to anybody, please." Then a suspicion flashed through his mind; and he asked, his voice once more sympathetic:

"Have you seen Mrs. Ashdown recently?"

"No. I haven't seen her since I went sick. By the way, sir.

I wonder if you could help me. What I actually came up for this morning was to see about Marcus's papers. Do you happen to know where I could find them?"

"You mean his service papers?"

"There are some private ones, too. His cheque books and that sort of thing. Marcus told me that if—if anything happened to him, I was to burn them."

Messiter's demeanour had changed. For once, he seemed resolute. But Wordsworth's, "I'm afraid I can't let you do that, not for a bit anyway," shook him, and his eyes were scary again as he asked:

"Then you do know where the papers are, sir?"

"Yes. I've got them myself. In that cupboard."

"Can't I even have the things that were in the drawer of his desk?"

"Not unless you're his executor. Are you?"

"Not as far as I know. And his solicitors don't know anything either. They say they were always pressing him to make his will. But he always refused to."

"So you've been to see his solicitors?"

"Yes, sir. I've just come from them. They told me that if he didn't leave a will everything would go to Millicent. Could I—could I just look through the papers?"

The green telephone rang while Messiter still spoke. Having answered, "A.I. twenty seven b. Wordsworth," the ex-chief of police at Cape Remittance heard, "This is Silcox, p.a. to Sir George Ramsay. Sir George wants to know if you can come down and see him immediately. He has Mrs. Ashdown with him."

"All right. Tell him I'll be down in a moment."

Wondering as he hung up, "What the hell do they want?" Wordsworth turned to Messiter with a not unkindly, "I'll have to think that over. Where can I get hold of you?"

"I'm staying at the R.A.F. Club, sir," said the boy; and Guy Conington came in as he went out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I

"MR. SILCOX was called away just after he phoned you. Sir George wants you to go right in."

The girl in George Ramsay's outer office, who must obviously be Miss Loftus, bent to her typewriter again. Memorising her mouse brown hair, her button of a nose, and her sallow complexion, Wordsworth went along the corridor to Room Forty Two.

Millicent Ashdown and George Ramsay sat almost side by side at the big desk with the light behind them. Both rose, and shook hands.

"We'll make sure no one disturbs us," began Ramsay, stepping to the door and shooting the spring bolt. Then he stepped back to his desk; reseated himself; pressed a button on the telephone, and called through it, "If anyone rings up, Miss Loftus, tell them I'm in conference."

"Sit down, Wordsworth," he went on, indicating a third chair, on the other side of the desk and facing the light.

Meanwhile Millicent, who had also reseated herself, was inhaling cigarette smoke. She wore a leopardskin hat, much larger than the pill boxes she had hitherto affected. A coat of the same fur draped a fourth chair, which stood by the collection of shellcases. Automatically Wordsworth noticed an ashtray in which lay four cigarette stubs, one still smouldering and all marked with lipstick.

"May I?" he asked, taking out his own case.

"Of course," smiled Millicent, but Ramsay's scarred face looked very stern and his voice grated as he said:

"It's time we all put our cards on the table, Wordsworth. I

gather that Mrs. Ashdown has already done so and that she has further told you one reason why she wants the mystery of her husband's death cleared up. But that isn't her only reason."

"Don't," interrupted Millicent, "for God's sake, don't tell him that, George"; and it seemed to Wordsworth as though the last shred of artificiality had been stripped from her voice. She repeated herself, "For God's sake, don't tell him that, George"; and, just for a second, Ramsay seemed to be faltering; but within another second he had continued:

"We can't go over all that again, my dear. I said he'd better know the whole truth, and I'm going to tell him the whole truth. Mrs. Ashdown's other reason for wanting the matter cleared up, Wordsworth, is her fear that—if the real murderer isn't discovered—people may suspect me."

Silence followed. Millicent dropped the stub of her cigarette into the ashtray. Her dark eyes were averted; Ramsay's, gray-green under that broad penthouse of a forehead, stared straight into Wordsworth's.

"Would it surprise you," he asked abruptly, "if people did suspect me? Have you been suspecting me yourself perhaps?"

Another silence followed. Millicent was lighting yet another cigarette. Staring back at Ramsay, Wordsworth wondered, "Shall I be frank with him?" It seemed the opportunity for frankness. In Cape Remittance he wouldn't have hesitated. Yet something made him hold back.

"Mrs. Ashdown suspects Boulte," he stalled. "He certainly threatened her husband. I've somebody else's evidence to the same effect."

"And what evidence, if any, have you against me?"

Once again, during that third and longest silence, with the woman's eyes still averted, but the man's still staring at him, Wordsworth remembered that George Ramsay ranked as an assistant chief of the Air Staff. Once again he realised his own lack of authority. But once again habit proved too strong for him.

"That's hardly a fair question, Sir George," he said. "Even if we were alone it wouldn't be fair. So I'm going to answer it with another one. Does Mrs. Ashdown know what happened in Paris in July nineteen hundred and seventeen?"

The woman might have received an electric shock. Bolting upright in her chair, she sat rigid. Not even an eyelash quivered. To Wordsworth's surprise, however, the man answered calmly and without the slightest hesitation, "She does, Wordsworth"; and, turning to her, he continued, "You see how right I was, Millicent?"

"Yes, I suppose you were."

Followed a fourth silence, during which—looking from the ugly scarred face of the man to the lovely painted face of the woman—it seemed to Wordsworth that now, at last, he could dominate the situation.

"There's another question I'd like to ask you, Sir George," he said, choosing his words very carefully. "The last time I was in this room you told me, in effect, that I'd better lay off because I should never be able to prove anything. Are you still of the same opinion?"

George Ramsay, in his turn, stalled.

"I was only advising you for your own good," he said slowly. "If you remember, I told you at the same time that I had no authority in the matter. Today I have even less authority, because—this is strictly between ourselves, Wordsworth—I shall be leaving this Ministry very shortly."

And, speaking still more slowly, he added, "According to present arrangements, I shall be on my way to America by the end of next week."

A sharp turn at the door handle startled all three of them. The handle was tried again. Then shoes—a woman's, it seemed to Wordsworth—pattered away along the corridor; and, recovering his concentration, he asked:

"Am I to assume that you've altered your opinion, that you're now just as anxious as Mrs. Ashdown is for me to find out who murdered her husband?"

Followed a fifth silence—shorter yet more pregnant, or so

it appeared to Wordsworth, with suppressed emotions than any of the others.

Then Ramsay said, "Yes"; and, again turning to the woman, "He'd better see it before you take it to the solicitors, Millicent"; and, once more staring at Wordsworth:

"She only found the thing this morning. It's her husband's will."

2

Ten minutes later Wordsworth, outside the door of Room Forty Two, heard it bolted again. "Those two," he thought, "don't want to be disturbed till they've had another pow-wow."

This seemed natural enough. Yet was it so natural that George Ramsay should be going to America? Didn't that fact, didn't the whole interview, increase rather than decrease one's suspicions of him? He'd made a great show of laying his cards on the table. But what aces had he shown? The fact—one must concentrate on facts—that he'd once stood his trial for murder must be pretty well known. And the over-dramatic production of Ashdown's will might possibly have been staged to make one suspect Adrian Messiter, who had been appointed the sole legatee and executor.

Just possibly that was why Ramsay had said, "Not that I can bring myself to suspect him, though he certainly had plenty of opportunity," and Ashdown's widow, "Neither can I, George. Adrian simply adored Marcus; besides, except for the insurance money, and that's only a thousand as far as I know, Marcus won't have left a bean."

The trail of the red herring. One of the oldest tricks in the world!

Sirens sounded the alert as Wordsworth climbed the stairs to his own room; and, almost simultaneously, the brass bells in the corridor shrilled the alarm. "Sugar orders," he told himself. "I've got to write up my dossier before I forget what those two said"; and to Conington, whom he found

locking their cupboard, "I'll see to all that, Guy. You run along and take cover."

Guy grumbled, "Just as I was going to do a spot of dictating"; and as he added, "blast it," the door which Wordsworth had closed behind him, was pushed open by Miss King, complete with notebook, who said:

"I wondered if you were still here, flight lieutenant. I can take your dictation in the shelter if you like."

"That'd be grand of you," smiled Guy, picking up both trays and ushering her out.

They left the door ajar. Before he reclosed it, Wordsworth watched them along the corridor. "No accounting for tastes," he thought. "But if Guy isn't trying to get off with that bint, I'm a Hottentot."

Guy's tastes in bints, however, were none of his business; and, seating himself, he began to write: "Monday 11.30 A.M. Sent for by George Ramsay. Found Millicent Ashdown with him." Guns fired a salvo; subconsciously he was aware of a bomb dropping—and, as he wrote on, of that vague thought which had first occurred to him as he drove to Pullen's battery headquarters.

He finished his notes of the recent interview, read them through, and referred to the pencil jottings he had made while talking to Messiter.

The boy's hint that Ashdown had thought himself in danger ("Marcus told me that if anything happened to him I was to burn his papers") taken in conjunction with the date of the will, signed at group headquarters a few days after the threat by Boulte, might be significant. Equally significant—one had only her word for it—might be Millicent Ashdown's contention, "I only found Marcus's will by accident, while I was looking through a lot of papers he told me to look after for him when we left Blessingford."

The really significant new fact, nevertheless—and one simply must stick to facts—which emerged from the two interviews, was that Albert Dowdy had actually opened the

window of Room Twenty Eight by climbing the iron staircase and slipping back the catch with a penknife.

Whereas Dowdy himself, when asked whether anyone could get in by the window, had only answered that he couldn't say.

"Better check my memory on that," thought Wordsworth; and looked up to see Frank Izod at the door.

"So you're not being a good little boy and obeying orders either," said Izod. "I thought I might just find you here. It's getting on for one o'clock. How about a spot of lunch?"

"I'm pretty busy today."

"So I gather." Izod glanced at the file of notes, on which Wordsworth had automatically laid his blotter. "All the same, I wish you'd come. It's my birthday, and I'm giving a little party. Gale Johnson's going to be there among other people. And if you've a few minutes to spare afterwards I'd like a little private talk with you. It's so difficult to get any privacy in this place."

Locking up, putting on his great coat, Wordsworth thought, "Clever devil. I believe he knew I couldn't resist the opportunity of meeting Gale."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I

GALE shook hands, and said, "Why, hallo, William. What a nice surprise. Frank never told me you were going to be here." Izod introduced a youngster in khaki as, "My nephew, John."

A large friendly woman, all real bosom and false pearls, billowed into the cocktail bar of the restaurant, declaiming, "Many happy returns of the day, Frank. I do hope we're not late. Celia's gone to powder her nose. The number of times that girl powders her nose is simply remarkable. I believe it's all due to war strain."

Celia, also in khaki, materialised before the first round of drinks and demanded a tomato juice. She monopolised John—obviously her property—immediately.

The woman who arrived next—decided Wordsworth—must be Izod's sister. She had the same shade of black hair, the same nose and the same eyes.

"Tim won't be long," she began. But her husband kept them waiting ten more minutes. A fussy little man who appeared to be in his middle sixties, he carried his civilian gas-mask in one hand and a small parcel in the other.

"You were supposed to be given this at breakfast, Frank," he bubbled. "But the man at the shop swore I said I'd call for it. I don't know what's the matter with all the shops nowadays. They never do anything one tells them."

His wife said, "There's a war on, Tim."

He bubbled back at her, "War or no war, I like things done properly."

Izod opened the parcel, which contained a crocodile-skin

cigar case, monogrammed in gold. Tim took his time deciding whether sherry or a martini would be the least unsuitable for his digestion, to which he proclaimed himself a martyr. Catching Gale's eyes, Wordsworth saw them twinkle with amusement. She seemed completely at her ease, and completely forgetful of their last conversation on the telephone.

"Lunch," ordered Izod, while his brother-in-law still toyed with the dry sherry of his final decision; and led the way through a full room to a circular table. Further orders placed Gale and Wordsworth together, with Izod on her other side, and Celia's mother, whose surname had sounded like Giggleswick, on his.

"So you're in the Air Force, too," began Mrs. (query?) Giggleswick. "Do tell me the war's going to end soon. I simply can't stand another winter in England. I'm a real sunshine woman. A man I know in the Tank Corps—at least, I think it's the Tank Corps, anyway it's something to do with motorcars—tells me that a man he knows in the Ministry of Economic Warfare says it's bound to be over in another twelvemonth because the Germans are short of fats."

She blathered on. Wordsworth, doing his best to cope with her, only caught the gist of a general conversation which seemed to be mainly concerned with film stars, bombs and the digestive capacities of Izod's brother-in-law. "If only," he thought, "this woman would come up to breathe."

His ordeal at the lips of the presumed Mrs. Giggleswick finished with the arrival of the sweets, to which she devoted herself with gusto and abandon. Izod was talking to his other neighbour, Celia. Gale, her golden brown eyes once more atwinkle, said, "I never realised how much you knew about world affairs, William. Tell me, was yesterday's lunch equally enjoyable?"

He twinkled back at her, "I see you'll have to have that written report in the end. Otherwise your curiosity will never be satisfied."

"I'm not in the least curious," she protested with just a touch of seriousness.

He risked, "Wouldn't you even like a verbal report?"

"I shall have to think that over," said Gale; and she went on, a shade too quickly, "Because I simply must be off now. My next appointment is at a quarter past two."

The implication, the link between this talk and Sunday night's, was too obvious to be missed. Listening to her tactful excuses, helping her into her cloth coat, watching her away across the restaurant, Wordsworth wondered if he could ever be really happy without her.

But could one ever be really happy with her? And did happiness matter so much anyway? By God, it did—even in wartime. Maybe particularly in wartime.

And yet ought one to marry during a war?

2

The party had broken up, and the restaurant was emptying. Izod paid his bill; took the chair next to Wordsworth's, and opened in a low voice:

"You probably won't thank me for interfering. But I suppose I'm the only real friend Tony's got. And I'm damn worried about him. Sometimes I think he's going clean off his rocker. He's lunching with his mother today. It happens to be her birthday too. Otherwise of course he'd have joined us. I'd like you to know Tony better, Wordsworth."

"Why?"

The interruption, purposefully brutal, seemed to shake Izod. For the first time, Wordsworth saw that smooth, actorish face betray real emotion.

"Because," went on Izod, after quite a pause, "the more one knows about a chap, the less one's liable to misjudge him. People always misjudge Tony. Not that I blame them, mind you. He's his own worst enemy. And, as you've probably realised, he's cursed with one of those inferiority complexes which he conceals under an assumption of superiority. You agree with me there, I hope."

"I hadn't thought about it." Wordsworth, curious and

very much on his guard, took a long pull at the excellent though overlarge cigar Izod had forced on him. "But your idea seems reasonable. He drinks rather a lot, I've observed."

"Only recently." Again the smooth face betrayed emotion. "He never used to."

"And he's got the devil's own temper, Izod."

"I admit he's hasty."

"Hasty." Wordsworth smiled. "You should have seen him this morning. He tried to break up his own car with the starting handle."

"I know. He told me about that. But Tony's tempers never last. And he's the frankest man I ever met, if you only understood how to tackle him."

Izod stopped—his face once more its smooth self, but his dark blue eyes very wary. "What's he driving at—a showdown?" Wordsworth asked himself; and aloud:

"Does that imply that you'd like me to tackle him?"

"That depends." Izod knocked the ash from his cigar. "It might be better if I talked to him first. I haven't so far. I've been hoping, you see, that it mightn't be necessary. It is, I suppose?"

"Why do you suppose that?"

"Mainly because"—this time, though the question had been shot at him, Izod neither paused nor betrayed emotion—"I've sized you up as the sort of fellow who never lays off once he's got his teeth into a thing. I'm a bit that way myself, I don't mind telling you. That's another reason why I've been so damn worried. Let's go, shall we?"

It took all Wordsworth's self-restraint to refrain from the question, "Was it because you were so worried that you tried to pocket that fuze?" Somehow he managed to hold his tongue until they were in Izod's car; and then all he said was:

"I want to be quite fair with you. There may be no need for either of us to tackle Boulte."

"You mean, Quaritch may wash the whole thing out?"

"Yes. That's what'd suit you best, isn't it?"

"Up to a point," admitted Izod; adding reflectively, "Still, I think I'd better have a talk to Tony. He won't be coming back this afternoon. But I'll do it first thing tomorrow and give you a tinkle on the telephone."

A strange bloke, Izod. Why couldn't he let sleeping dogs lie? Had he got the wind up?

Perhaps.

3

On his return to the Ministry, Wordsworth found his In tray full of papers, and Guy Conington, who had been reading his notes, full of curiosity. He made a memorandum of his talk with Izod; and dealt with the routine papers first.

"What I don't understand," said Conington when they paused for tea, "is why you don't send for Dowdy and ask him why the hell he didn't come clean about having opened that window?"

"And where would that get me? He'd only say he'd forgotten all about it. Besides, I'm not really in a position to send for people until I hear something from Quaritch."

"You won't hear from him until he's consulted somebody else, and he won't hear from anybody until everybody's consulted everybody else. You mark my words, W.W. The civil service'll have a finger in this pie before you're through with it. And you know what that means—just a chain of unlimited irresponsibility. Still, you're probably right. You'll only get it in the neck, if *you* take on any responsibility. That's not what we're paid for. We're paid to be good little yes-boys."

And, "Yes, sir. Certainly, sir," said Conington into the telephone a few minutes later. "The squadron leader will speak to you at once."

The hoarse voice at the other end of the wire was Daddy Dorland's. Wordsworth asked him if he were feeling better. Daddy said he hoped to be back at work by the end of the week.

"Air Commodore Quaritch came round to see me yester-

day," he went on. "We're on an open line so I can't say everything I'd like to. But what I must say to you, Wordsworth, is this. You've done very well so far, and it's quite possible your suggestion will be adopted; but, until it is adopted, I don't want you to take any further action without Air Commodore Quaritch's authority in writing. In writing, Wordsworth. That's the great point. I hope you understand me."

"Perfectly, sir," said Wordsworth; and hung up to find their messenger at his elbow. The messenger handed him a single envelope marked, "Secret," opening which he read:

"Dear Wordsworth, With reference to our talk on Saturday afternoon I was very interested in what you had to tell me and so was Group Captain Dorland whom I visited yesterday. Your suggestion that we might call in Scotland Yard is being put forward. I hope to let you have some good news in the course of the next few days. You will be pleased to know that Group Captain Dorland quite agrees with me that your energy and your particular capabilities should be utilised to better effect in the future, Sincerely yours, Stephen Quaritch."

On being shown this letter, Conington, who had listened in to the talk with Daddy, stroked his straw-blond hair and took out his gold cigarette case.

"What have I to say, W.W.?" he remarked, as he lit up "Only that if I were you I should play Brer Fox. Or was it Brer Rabbit? He just lay low and said nuffing. You do the same—you don't want no trouble any more than Steve does—and you'll be a wing commander in two shakes of a duck's tail. Why, you might even get an O.B.E. into the bargain. Wing Commander William Wordsworth, O.B.E., M.C., D.F.C. I might even manage a gossip par about that. 'The new wing commander, by the way, is not related to our famous English poet.'"

Wordsworth scowled, "Don't be an ass, Guy." The prospect of promotion, nevertheless, was not entirely without its attraction.

"More pay and more allowances," he caught himself thinking. "I could do with 'em if I make up my mind to get married."

For why the blazes should he worry about his service problem any more? Let Steve Quaritch and Daddy Dorland do that. Let them take the responsibility if . . .

"But that won't happen," he decided, scowling again. "That can't happen. It's a crazy idea anyway."

And as he drove back to his flat he determined to let the service problem drop for the personal. Did he or did he not intend proposing to Gale?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I

RAGGED gunfire punctuated most of that Monday night; but Wordsworth slept all through it, and woke to his customary routine of tea, toilet and breakfast. Breakfast finished, he re-read the letter he had written (after tearing up heaven-knew-how-many sheets of club notepaper) to Gale.

On the whole, the letter would do. Anyway it didn't bind him to anything—and there was no reason, nowadays, why she shouldn't come to his quarters. If she wouldn't, so much the worse for her.

All the same the prospect of a refusal made him distinctly nervous. He wanted her more than he had ever wanted anybody. But they hadn't known each other a fortnight. And after all there was the question of Michael. And—damn it all—what with income tax at eight and six in the pound, and a war on, could anybody but a very young man or a lunatic contemplate marriage?

Whereupon the most peculiar thought struck him. "Am I really a cad?" he wondered; and, as the question amplified itself into, "Am I so very much better than Ashdown?" he felt his cheeks flush.

By that time, nevertheless, he had already sealed the envelope; and ten minutes to nine found him dropping it into Helen Stannard's letter box.

Not until he turned Minnie Mouse out of Whitehall into King Charles Street did he remember—so rigid had been his determination to dismiss his service problem completely—that Izod might tackle Boulte that very morning. But midday came without any telephone message from Izod; and, pre-

cisely on the last stroke of Big Ben, Messiter entered to introduce a starchy old gentleman in a high collar as, "Mr. Archbold of Archbold and Anstruther—we've come about Marcus's papers, sir."

Messiter remained standing. The old gentleman, after Conington had fetched him a chair, cleared his throat and began, "I understand, Squadron Leader Wordsworth, that you have hitherto refused—and, as far as I can judge, quite rightly—to part with certain documents, keys and other articles which were the property of the late Air Vice-Marshal Marcus Ashdown. Yesterday, however, another document, to wit the late air vice-marshal's will, was brought to me by his widow, and pursuant to the testator's wishes, it is now my duty, acting on behalf of my client, Mr. Messiter, to demand the properties in question. Should you have any doubt as to my authority for making this demand, I have brought a copy of the will with me."

Mr. Archbold stopped there. Wordsworth said the correct thing; rose; walked to the cupboard; took out two bundles wrapped in brown paper; opened them, and laid them on his desk.

"Did you by any chance make a list of the documents?" asked Mr. Archbold, taking the keys.

"I did."

"In duplicate, I hope."

"Yes."

"Excellent."

Conington produced a copy of the list. Mr. Archbold suggested that Conington and Messiter should check it against the contents of the two bundles. While they were doing so, he said to Wordsworth:

"This is a very sad business. I first knew Marcus Ashdown when he was a mere boy. To Mr. Messiter, as I think you know, he stood in loco parentis. A pension, of course, will be awarded to his widow. Taking her circumstances into consideration, the financial provisions seem to me entirely equitable."

"Quite," agreed Wordsworth. "Quite."

Mr. Archbold, after a moment's consideration during which he polished a pair of old-fashioned pince-nez, agreed to the suggestion that Messiter should receipt the duplicate list. This done, and the bundles wrapped up again, Conington escorted the solicitor and his client to the lift.

"And some people say they can't read Dickens because he's too dated," remarked Conington on his return. "Our friend Archbold might have stepped straight out of *Dombey and Son*. What did you insist on that signature for?"

"For one thing, because Messiter had no right to take away some of those documents. Ashdown's service papers are really Air Ministry property. Archbold knew that as well as I do. He's a wily old fox, in my opinion."

"But there was no reason for him to be wily?"

"Possibly."

"Meaning, W.W.?"

"Meaning, my dear Guy, that plenty of people have been murdered for less than a thousand, which is the amount of Ashdown's insurance policy. However, it's none of my damn business now, or yours either. So you'd better get hold of your girl friend and draft out that paper Fighter Command asked us for."

"She's out at lunch now. I've booked her for one o'clock."

"And since when can we book a particular shorthand-typist?"

Conington only smiled. Wordsworth did not press the question—and went out to his own lunch at exactly five minutes to one.

2

Minnie Mouse transported her owner through fog and rain to the Royal Automobile Club, where his Air Ministry appointment entitled Wordsworth to temporary membership. Drinking a glass of sherry in the upstairs bar he was accosted by Moxom, who said:

"Hallo. One doesn't often see you here, W.W. And you

hardly ever pay us a visit in the War Room nowadays. I heard you got cut over by a bomb. Are you all right again? You're looking a bit under the weather."

"Oh, I'm all right. Just a bit fed up, that's all."

"Who isn't?" Moxom twirled at one of the largest moustaches in the R.A.F. "Two full-size wars are too much in one lifetime. Have another glass of sherry wine, and let's lunch together."

Over lunch, Moxom—always an inveterate gossip—referred to George Ramsay.

"We've been hearing all sorts of rumours," he said. "But I happen to know for certain that he's leaving the Ministry. He'll be a big loss, I think. You know what his job is, of course."

"No."

"It's—" Moxom murmured three letters. "And—" He murmured two more letters and then another three, none of which conveyed any meaning to Wordsworth, who pretended, however—such being the force of habit—that they did.

A waitress came with their dishes, and Moxom changed the conversation.

"If there's any one man who can solve the problem of the night bomber," he said presently, "it's the chap I was talking about. He's an expert on barrage balloons, too. I once heard him lecture about them. Let me see, when was that? About three months before the war, I believe. He told us that, theoretically, balloons could be flown right into the stratosphere. He said they ought to have selfsealing envelopes filled with helium instead of hydrogen." And Moxom talked on until they were interrupted by Prisworthy, who asked if he might join them.

Balloons, in the pugfaced Prisworthy's estimation, were about as useless as searchlights. He pinned his faith to massed batteries firing "P.E."

"What's that?" asked Moxom.

"If you don't know, I can't tell you. But, according to

George Ramsay and Artemus Atkinson, we ought to have it in production by the end of nineteen forty-two."

"Nineteen forty-two," sighed Moxom, twirling at his moustaches; and, glancing at his wristwatch, called for his bill.

"I'm off duty this afternoon," said Prисworthy when he and Wordsworth were alone at the table. "If you're not in too much of a hurry, wait and have some more coffee with me."

He gobbled his one dish quickly, and led downstairs into a quiet corner of the smoking room, to which a waiter brought their coffee.

"Have you seen Boulte lately?" he asked. "I saw him this morning. He's a funny devil, isn't he?"

"Very."

"Did you know that he and Negresco were cousins?"

"No."

"Neither did I till Negresco told me so. By the way"—Prисworthy's casualness, Wordsworth realised, was assumed—"I suppose he's put the kybosh on your end of the inquiry?"

"Pretty well."

As if by mutual consent they sheered off the topic, and began to discuss Security.

"We don't even know the meaning of the word," said Prисworthy. "Look at the sentences we give, even when we catch people out. What's the good of imprisoning enemy agents? It's a positive encouragement to the ones we don't catch. The Hun chops their heads off. Wouldn't you, if you had your way?"

"I'd give them a spot of third degree, before I got really drastic."

Wordsworth's mind, however, had wandered a little; and, just before they parted, he could not help asking—also with an assumption of casualness:

"Do you know anything about time-bomb fuzes? Somebody told me the other day that ninety-six hours was pretty nearly the maximum."

"That's the generally accepted theory, I believe. You know the principle, of course."

"Some acid, isn't it?"

"Yes. We circulated a paper about it the other day. I'll send you a copy if you like."

"Thanks," said Wordsworth; and returned to the Air Ministry, thinking, "Sugar Quaritch and Daddy Dorland. If only they'd give me a free hand I believe I could crack this thing."

But Conington's, "A lady phoned while you were out at lunch, she said she might ring up again about half past three, but if she couldn't manage it, she'd write to you," set the compass needle of his mind swinging again; and it continued to oscillate until well after four o'clock.

By that time, of course, unless Izod were driving her home to Tapworth, Gale would be on her way to the station. Still, she might just telephone from the station, or even when she got back to Manor Cottage.

"Green line, W.W.," corrected Conington when, some five minutes later, Wordsworth mistakenly picked up the black telephone; and over the green line came Izod's smooth:

"Is that you, Wordsworth? Are you doing anything for dinner tonight? If not, Tony wants us both to dine with him. Any time after six-thirty at the Eccentric Club. His flat's just opposite. We can go along there for a talk afterwards."

"Right you are," said Wordsworth; but the compass needle of his mind still veered to Gale.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I

FRANK IZOD was not quite old enough to remember the palmy days of the Eccentric Club when, housed in Shaftesbury Avenue, it had been the meeting place for all Bohemian London. But he knew about those days both from hearsay and from reading; and, as he stood alone under the stuffed owl which still decorated the bar in Ryder Street, his mind went back to his adolescence, just after the South African War.

"Grand times," he thought "Grand times after the last war too. Will they ever come back again? The lord alone knows. I suppose we're going to beat these blasted Germanos. But even if we do, what'll life be like afterwards? Life's habit. And I've got used to my comforts. Oh well, there's always the drink."

He told the barman to mix him a cocktail, drank it, and began to feel a little more cheerful. We'd given the Germanos one good knock anyway. They wouldn't risk much more daylight bombing. And, sooner or later, the Americans would have to come in on our side, otherwise their gold wouldn't be much use to them. An Anglo-American alliance. But his private project for an Anglo-American alliance seemed to have gone phut.

"Gale's fallen in love with Wordsworth," his thoughts continued. "What a pest that fellow's making of himself. I wish Tony would tell me the whole truth. I hope to God he behaves himself this evening."

"Hallo, Frank," said Tony Boulte, entering the bar at that moment. "Hasn't our policeman turned up yet?"

"No. And you're not going to touch a drop of alcohol until he does."

Boulte grinned, "*Zum befehl, Herr Staffel Kapitän*"; and took a pinch of snuff. Sirens wailed the alert. A steward came in to announce, "There's a gentleman asking for you." Izod went out and returned with Wordsworth. Boulte, obviously on his best behaviour, said:

"So there you are. Splendid. What'll you have? They shake a pretty good martini here."

An old buffer rose from one of the tables and came over to them, insisting, "You must have this one on me, gentlemen."

Izod stood the second, and final, round.

"I think I'll go home now," said the old buffer—and went.

2

The dining room of the club was almost empty. Before they sat down Izod called Wordsworth's attention to the commemorative tablets which decorated the walls.

"You're both too young to remember Arthur Roberts," he said. "I can only just recollect him myself."

"Comedian, wasn't he?" asked Boulte.

"Yes. I saw him at a music hall. The Tivoli, I believe."

"The Tivoli was a music hall in my time," put in Wordsworth.

Boulte said. "The Empire promenade used to be my pet hunting ground when I was at the Shop. Makes me feel bloody old when I go and see pictures there. I seem to remember being chucked out once—and ending up at Vine Street."

"When were you at the Shop?" asked Wordsworth.

"I left in nineteen-eleven."

"Then you must be three years older than I am."

"Just about. Let's feed, shall we?"

They sat down. All three of them were on guard, yet all three anxious to preserve the amenities while they ate; and this proved tolerably easy because fundamentally they belonged to the same public school class of Englishmen, though

none of them professed much respect for the "old school tie," on which topic Izod turned the conversation before they were midway of an excellent meal washed down by mild whiskies and sodas.

"There's still too much of it," he said. "We're not going to win this war by behaving like the Fifth Form at St. Dominic's."

"Or the Cock House at Felsgarth," agreed Boulte.

Still preserving the amenities, Wordsworth disputed their contention, and spun out the argument till the end of dinner. This was an entirely new Boulte, selfcontrolled, with hardly a sneer on his lips, playing the host almost to perfection. Almost. But not quite.

"Soft-pedalling," decided Wordsworth. "Waiting for his cue from Izod? They're a rum couple. I wonder whether Izod made his money or whether he inherited it."

Izod's next remark might have been the result of thought reading.

"Winchester never did me any good in after life," he said. "They taught me to translate Horace but not how to read a balance sheet. I'm a stockbroker by profession—if you can call stockbroking a profession."

"And a financier, Frank."

"Only in a mild way," smiled Izod; and, turning to Wordsworth, "Tony's referring to some deals I used to help him with. He's tried most things, from bootlegging to gun running."

"Not gun running," corrected Boulte. "It's just as legitimate to sell arms as it is to sell potatoes. If the powers that be had taken on the Oerlikon gun when I first brought it to them——"

"We might both have made our fortunes," said Izod, still smiling; and talk turned on light anti-aircraft and anti-tank artillery as Boulte called for cigars.

The talk interested Wordsworth. Momentarily he forgot the purpose of this meeting. But Boulte's chance exclamation, "*Scheibenkleister*" after he had insisted, with just a touch of

excitement, "You can say what you like about the Bofors, Frank, but we must have something lighter and more mobile, either a twenty or a twenty-five millimetre, for close protection," substituted the policeman in him for the gunner.

"I wonder if you'd mind telling me," he interrupted, "what that word, which seems rather a favourite with you, means."

Izod laughed. Boulte blew a smoke ring, and explained:

"Well, *Scheibe* can mean either a pane of glass, a drag target or the wrong end, from the pilot's point of view, of a searchlight beam; and *Kleister* means paste, as I told our esteemed friend Miss Kemble when she rang up to ask me the same question a few days ago. But when a Berliner puts the two words together he implies, as I did not tell the Kemble, precisely what a New Yorker implies when he talks about a shyster."

"We water it down to four-letter man," added Izod, still laughing; while the possible importance of the fact that Miss Kemble should have passed his casual inquiry straight back to the man who had caused him to make it registered in Wordsworth's mind.

"I wonder if she told him who asked her about that word?" he thought. "It only shows one how damn careful one's got to be." And, fully on his guard again, he listened to Boulte's:

"Well, I suppose we'd better go along to my place, now, Frank."

The all clear sounded as Boulte paid their bill.

3

A taxicab had just drawn up at the glass portico of the club. Out of it stepped the old buffer who had stood them their first drink.

"Just my luck," he grumbled. "When I got home, I found they'd blown my philoprogenitive flat to sugarsticks. Still, I managed to salve this gory suitcase."

Izod carried in the suitcase. The old buffer gave the taxi-

man a ten shilling note, and asked them to have "just one more tiddler." Boulte said, "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm afraid we've got work to do."

A fine rain wetted their faces as the three crossed the street towards the front door of a red brick corner building which a woman opened to Boulte's ring.

He led on, flashing a torch, up steep carpeted stairs, to the third floor; and, taking out his latchkey, through a doorway by which stood fire-fighting equipment, into a narrow window-less hall from whose ceiling hung a naked bulb.

"Frank always says I live like a pig," he remarked. "But then Frank's a sybarite. Pray enter the withdrawing room."

Half shielding the light in that oblong room hung a piece of blackout material. On the plush cloth of a rickety three-legged table stood a flask-shaped half bottle of whiskey, a jug of water and three thick tumblers. A hard chesterfield and an armchair sagging on one castor, both covered with the same nondescript material, a wheelback chair, its seat piled with newspapers and magazines, four hunting prints, all hanging askew on sooty distemper, and pseudo-velvet curtains whose original brown had faded to mustard completed the furnishing.

"A poor place but mine own," quoted Boulte. "At least until next quarter day or the next dropping."

Still in his daytime khaki, he stooped to switch on an electric heater; told his guests to park their things anywhere they liked; unbuckled his Sam Browne, from which hung his revolver; dropped the loaded leather on to the floor; swept the papers from the wheelback, and straddled it between his breeched knees while Izod took the sofa and Wordsworth the remaining armchair.

"Help yourselves to drinks when you feel like it," Boulte went on. "I'm sorry there's no soda. And now let's get down to brass tacks. The question before the house is: Who bumped off the late Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown, O.B.E., A.F.C., commonly known as Bottom Upwards? How about you, Frank?"

"If you think that's funny," said Izod, "I don't."

Izod's face was in shadow; but his voice betrayed anger, and—or so it seemed to Wordsworth—a touch of fear. Boulte had seated himself directly under the light. Once again he looked the jungle animal. Imaginatively one saw the ears pressed even flatter against that round skull, and every muscle tensing for the spring.

"He's like a cheetah," thought Wordsworth.

In the meantime Izod had unbuckled and unbuttoned his blue R.A.F. jacket, the left side of which sagged, just revealing the pearl handle of a small revolver. He took out the revolver, which had a very short nickel-plated barrel, and laid it on the chesterfield, remarking casually:

"I think I'll give up carrying this damn thing. It's always digging into me."

But Wordsworth noticed that he had placed it close to his right hand.

"Sorry, old man," apologised Boulte. "I didn't mean to rub you up the wrong way. How about letting the police kick off? That's the usual procedure, I believe. Let's pretend I'm the murderer, and that Wordsworth's trying to prove it."

"I don't think that's funny either, Tony. You promised me, when I persuaded Wordsworth to dine with me, that you'd behave yourself."

"And aren't I?" The pale blue eyes turned on Wordsworth, who said:

"I've no complaints to make so far. But I don't quite see where your idea is going to get us."

"Don't you? Have you got a better one? After all, somebody murdered Ashdown, Negresco or no Negresco, and did it damn cleverly too. We're all agreed on that, I hope. So it boils down to the routine questions: When, which we know to within a few seconds: Where, which we also know: How, which I have no doubt Wordsworth's been investigating for the best part of a fortnight; Why; and finally, Who? All I've said is that I'm quite willing to play Who; and to answer any

questions Wordsworth likes to put to me. If that isn't fair enough, I don't know what is."

He stopped there. Just as his words ceased, they heard another alert sounding, first distantly, then close. "Blasted row," said Izod, tossing the butt of his cigar over the heater into the untidy fireplace—and, in that second, Wordsworth made up his mind. Quaritch or no Quaritch, this chance was too good to be missed.

"All right. I'll play with you, Boulte," he said. "But only on one condition."

"The condition being?"

"That you both keep your tempers."

"Both?" queried Izod. "How do I come into it?"

"He's going to presume," interrupted Boulte, "that the murderer must have had an accomplice. Am I right, sir?"

"If you don't mind," said Wordsworth, habit so strong on him that he could almost imagine himself back in his old office at Cape Remittance, "I'll do the questioning. And my first question to you, Boulte, is: What relation are you to Major Negresco?"

"First cousin. His mother and mine are sisters," answered Boulte, without hesitation but apparently taken by surprise.

"You're not suggesting, I hope—" This time the interruption came from Izod.

"I'm not making any suggestions," snapped Wordsworth. "Boulte asked me to play a game with him—and I'm playing it to the best of my ability. Question number two. What was your object, Boulte, in broadcasting the information, some nights ago at the Hotel Fantastic, that a certain member of the Air Staff had got away with murder?"

Boulte hesitated, and prevaricated, "I was as tight as a drum that night. Didn't I admit it next day?"

"You did. But you, Izod, were perfectly sober. And you told me, just as you were leaving, not to take too much notice of anything Boulte said. Why didn't you tell me not to take any notice?"

Izod, in his turn, hesitated, but did not apparently prevaricate.

"Because," he said, "I'm convinced that the man to whom Tony referred as having got away with murder, also murdered Ashdown."

"Then why did you try to pocket that fuze?"

Despite the shadow cast by the piece of blackout material on the electric pendant, Wordsworth observed, as only once previously that actorish face of Izod's betray real emotion; and knew his, "I did nothing of the sort, I was only examining it," for a deliberate lie.

Silence seemed one's best card. A liar usually elaborated. But Izod didn't; and Wordsworth, turning to Boulte again, continued:

"Some two or three months ago—I could give you the exact date if I had my notes with me—you had a talk, rather a private talk, with Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown who was then commanding at Blessingford. Would you like to tell me what happened at that interview?"

Boulte hesitated again; and Wordsworth saw a feline glint come into his pale blue eyes; saw the breeched knees close till the buckskin crinkled on the wooden chair seat.

Then Boulte, astonishingly selfcontrolled but obviously ready to fly off the handle at provocation, said, "There's nothing on God's earth I'd like better"; and, watching Izod covertly, Wordsworth saw him sit bolt upright on the chesterfield.

"But I'll tell it my own way without any of your damn questions, Wordsworth, and I don't want any interference from you either, Frank," said Anthony Boulte.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I

ALL three had forgotten the alert; but before Boulte could begin they heard engines, and instantaneously a sharpening scream extinguished the light for three full seconds during which they waited for the burst of the bomb. The bomb burst. The window behind the yellow curtains rattled, but did not break. The light flashed on again. Three more bombs burst. Guns fired.

"Nuisance raider," said Boulte. "Sounded like a Messerschmitt one one o. Don't suppose our guns were within a mile of him"; and with hardly a change in his voice, he continued:

"If you want me to tell you why I went up to Blessingford, Wordsworth, I went up there fully intending to put five bullets into the fat paunch of that stinking *Scheibenkleister* Air-Vice-Bloody-Marshall Ashdown. That gives you *mens rea*. I happen to know a bit about the law. *Mens rea* means criminal intent. All right, I had it. So why didn't I shoot the sod out of hand? He wouldn't have been the first."

"Steady, old chap."

Izod had spoken. Boulte spat a curse at him.

"You seem to imagine Wordsworth's a b.f., Frank. Do you think he hasn't found out everything about me that's worth finding out? I said Ashdown wouldn't have been the first man I'd killed. And I stick to it. So why didn't I blast the entrails out of him when I had the chance? Because I was afraid of being hanged for murder? *Bolux*. I said five bullets, not six. The sixth would have been for myself. I've always taken what was coming to me. But if I'd done myself in nobody except you, Frank, would have known why I shot

the bastard. And you probably wouldn't have had the guts to tell them about Derek at the inquest. And even if you had, it would have been hushed up. For the good of the service! Well, I've sugared that.

"Yes. I've sugared that," repeated Boulte, pale brown moustache bristling, lips curling back to show pointed teeth. "Let 'em put me on trial for blowing that *Scheibenkleister* arseways with a time bomb—and prove I did it if they can. They'll have a hell of a job. How did I get into the room for one thing? How did I manufacture the ruddy bomb for another? But once I'm in the witness box, my job'll be money for jam. 'Motive,' I'll say. 'You bet I had plenty of motive. That sonofabitch murdered my halfbrother, Derek Patterson. Derek would be alive now, and not the only one either, if Ashdown hadn't given orders to stop the flak maps being circulated.' Do you know what a flak map is, Wordsworth?"

He paused. Wordsworth meditated for a second. Then he answered very quietly:

"Yes. And I know all about your halfbrother's death, Boulte. I'm sorry——"

"I don't want your bloody sympathy," broke in Boulte. "What I want is revenge."

He paused again. Izod shifted on his seat and fidgeted at his collar.

"But that's not reasonable, Tony," he said. "We don't even know for certain that Derek's machine was shot down by flak. It might have been a night fighter."

"We know the route he took, right into the barrage——"

"Still, we can't be absolutely certain. And Ashdown's dead. What's the good of talking about revenge on a dead man, Tony? It's just crazy."

"All right then, I am a bit crazy. Most murders are committed by lunatics, anyway. But I'm quite sane enough to stand my trial. And if Wordsworth wants any more evidence, he's only got to go across the hall and into my bedroom. You show him the way, Frank. I've said my piece, and now I'm going to have a drink."

2

Boulte unstraddled the wheelback chair; rose, and moved to the table. His hand shook when he tilted the whiskey bottle against the glass; and Wordsworth observed that his face had gone gray—as men's faces go gray after long battle.

"Carry on," he said. "Both of you. Seeing's believing. Everything's there. In my bedroom."

"He's quite crazy," thought Wordsworth; and he looked at Izod, whose eyes seemed to be saying, "We'd better humour him." Then they too rose and went out into the hall, where Izod—his hand, also, shaking—opened another door, and clicked on a light.

That bulb, like the one in the hall, was without a shade and so powerful that one's first glance seemed to register every single thing in Boulte's bedroom simultaneously. But after that first glance, both Wordsworth's eyes and Izod's concentrated on a single piece of furniture—the kitchen table between the lavatory basin and the heavily draped window.

On that table lay an empty shell, a couple of fuzes, a heap of springs and little toothed wheels, a gutted clock case and a gutted watch case. Held down to the only vacant space by coloured pins was a diagrammatic drawing of a fuzed bomb from which lines led to an explanatory chart.

As they approached and bent over this table, Wordsworth heard the breath whistle through Izod's nostrils.

"Christ," said Izod.

He was shaking again. Shaking all over. Every muscle in his body seemed out of control.

"I won't believe it," he went on. "I can't believe it. Tony always liked his practical joke, Wordsworth. That's all this is. Just a practical joke. You see that, don't you?"

But even while he spoke Wordsworth had seen that other paper, which was held down and half concealed by the empty shell.

He lifted the shell a little, and picked up the paper, on which were three rough drawings; one, in plan, of a room

which could only be Room Twenty Eight, and two sectional—the window and locker of the same room and staircase which led up to the window from the outside.

He folded the paper in two, and pocketed it. Izod, his breath whistling again, saw him carefully examine the diagram of the time bomb, take out his notebook and make one entry. Next, he examined, without touching them, the other articles on the table, and made other entries.

“What are you going to do?” Izod managed to ask.

“Nothing more for the moment. You may be right. Though it doesn’t look like it. Let’s go back to him, shall we?”

“Not yet.” Izod’s right hand gripped Wordsworth’s arm. “Please. Listen. I know Tony. He couldn’t have done it. He simply couldn’t have done it. He isn’t that type. He hasn’t got that that temperament.”

“Let’s go back,” repeated Wordsworth. But Izod’s hand only gripped him more convulsively; and, just as his muscles tensed to shake off that grip, something thudded against the ceiling, and the naked bulb jumped on its cord, and flakes of plaster fell on them, and the light went out, and glass fell on them, and the door was wrenched open, and a torch flashed and Boulte was calling to them, “Incendiary. Oil bomb, I think. Smack through our roof into the top flat. All hands to the stirrup pump.”

“Born leader,” thought Wordsworth in that moment. “Gone wrong. Pity.”

For Boulte’s voice had command in it, and a new gaiety; and as they followed through the narrow hall in which light still burned, and out on to the landing, he snapped orders at them, “Take those buckets, Wordsworth. There’s a housemaid’s sink you can refill ’em at. You bring the pump and the sandbags, Frank. The axe is topside, unless the housekeeper’s pawned it. I’ll be breaking the door down.”

He leaped the stairs three at a time. Before they made the housemaid’s sink on the half-landing, they heard wood splintering to the axe.

"Just stay here and keep on filling this bucket from the other," said Izod. And his voice, too, held a note of command.

He uncoiled the pump, dropped one nozzle into the bucket, tucked the sandbags under one arm, the stirrup under the other, and disappeared up the stairs.

More wood splintered. A crash told that the door must be down. Wordsworth smelt smoke. Downstairs he could hear a battering on the street door. That door, too, must be open. Draught poured up the staircase. He could no longer smell the smoke. Then the pump nozzle began to suck water from the bucket. He watched the one bucket empty, poured in the other, refilled the other from the sink.

Now he could smell smoke again. Now he could see smoke, a thin film of it, eddying in the updraught from the front door. The film thickened. He coughed, choked, filled his sixth (or was it seventh?) bucket; heard fire-engine bells clang, thought, "Those two must be having a tough time"; heard a window broken; heard feet pounding up the stairs towards him, saw a man with a brass-nozzled hose; was asked a question, jerked his thumb upwards in answer; filled yet another bucket, heard more feet; saw the big hose whose nozzle had been carried on up the stairs swell with water; heard Boulte's, "Those chaps were jolly quick, Frank; but I don't fancy I'll have to pay any more rent for this shack"; saw, even in the half-light, that both Boulte's face and Izod's were black as sweeps' faces, and stopped filling his buckets as someone said, "You gentlemen had better get out of this."

"Not before I salvage my kit," said Boulte.

3

Sirens wailed the all clear, as Wordsworth unlocked his own flat. He wore his helmet. The greatcoat he carried on his right arm, the gasmask case slung over his left shoulder, were soggy with water. Methodically, he went to his bedroom; opened the cupboard; took out a hanger, and sus-

pended the coat from one hook in the door, the gasmask case and the helmet from the other.

Next, he unbuckled his equipment, emptying the cartridges from the wet pouch, removing the pistol from the holster.

"Lucky to have saved them," he thought.

His jacket had been roughly dried by the night porter at the Eccentric Club, where he had left Boulte and Izod. He emptied the pockets; took it off, and, examining it carefully, found it undamaged. His only pair of trousers—he had already decided—though a bit sodden, would just do till the new ones were delivered by his tailor. He took them off, too; stripped; put on a dressing gown, picked his pyjamas from the bed, and went to the bathroom.

"Lucky it's come on again," thought continued as the hot water poured from the tap; but soaking himself till the chill went out his bones, his thoughts turned to Boulte's confession (only, was it a confession?) and those gadgets, that paper pinned to the table by the lavatory basin in the bedroom from which Boulte had emerged with clothes piled over his arm, and carrying two pairs of treed fieldboots, in that last second before the ceiling fell and the water poured down.

A stout fellow, Boulte. And Izod hadn't done too badly either.

"If I'm any judge of a man," decided Wordsworth, "Izod's out of it." But was Boulte out of it? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

He climbed out of his bath; towelled himself; put on pyjamas and dressing gown; and mixed a whiskey and hot water. Drinking the toddy, he remembered the paper he had taken from the table in Boulte's bedroom; and unfolded it. Could one hang a cat on this evidence? Could one put Izod in the box to confirm what Boulte had told them, what they had both seen?

"Not a hope," he decided. "Izod would be a hostile witness. And he's been doing his damndest to shield Boulte from the word jump."

The hands of the pigskin travelling clock on his bedside table pointed to one. But the hot drink, instead of making

him sleepy, had only stimulated his mind. He lit a cigarette; and, pacing his bedroom, reconstructed that last half hour he had spent with Boulte and Izod in the bar of the club. Each of them had behaved as one would expect normal men to behave after their experience with the fire bomb.

"Rather fun," he remembered Boulte saying; and Izod, "It's a good thing we were there, the whole building would have caught otherwise"; and Boulte, characteristically, "There'll be one hell of a blaze-up in London before we're through if the fire watching isn't better organised." Each of them had given him a normal good night, too.

All the same, if Boulte were normal, there was no such place as Colney Hatch.

"A bit barmy," finally decided Wordsworth. "And if Ramsay did it he's even barmier, because Ashdown would have had to give his wife her divorce sooner or later. While as for the Dowdys, a chap'd have to be clean off his chump to risk a rope round his neck for a little tart like Flossie. So maybe there is something in that other idea of mine. And now I'd better try to get some sleep, otherwise I'll feel like a piece of chewed rag in the morning."

It was half past one by then; and, abruptly remembering that he had left the hall light on, he went to turn it out. Just before he clicked up the switch, it struck him that he had forgotten to look in the letter box. "Do just as well in the morning," he thought; but routine—one always looked in that box when one came home—proved too strong; and, lifting the metal flap, he picked out three envelopes, one of them blue, unstamped, and addressed in an obviously feminine handwriting.

Memory flashing at him, "Gale promised she'd write if she couldn't get me on the phone," he slit the envelope, and took out the single sheet of blue paper to read: "Dear William, I tried to get you at the Ministry. As I couldn't, I'll leave this at your flat on my way to the station. I shall be spending tomorrow, Wednesday, night, in London. A friend's giving me a bed, but I'm free for dinner if that appeals to you. Of

course I'll pay for myself, so don't let's go any place that's too dear. Don't bother to write. Just phone me at my friend's number, Flaxman 3986, any time after seven and tell me where to meet you. That's to say if you can manage it. Naturally I'll understand if you can't. G."

4

And, "Blast it," thought Wordsworth, still standing under the hall light. "Oh, blast it. This would happen."

For tomorrow night (or rather tonight) he was due to sleep at the Ministry again. Would he though? Not if he could get Guy to function for him. And if Guy had a date, he must get someone else.

Sleep at the Ministry with Gale in London. Not bloody likely. He'd wangle out of night duty somehow. Even if it meant going sick.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I

"WHY aren't you coming back tonight, mummy?" asked Michael as he kissed Gale goodbye.

"Because I've a job of work to do, darling."

"What—all night?"

Answering evasively, that she wouldn't be able to catch a decent train home, Gale thought, "He's getting altogether too sharp. I wonder what I'll do when he begins to grow up. Lordy, it's going to be difficult." And the thought pursued her as she set off, carrying her light suitcase, to catch the Tapworth bus.

It was still dark; and the bus when it drew up, ten minutes late, opposite the Rose and Dragon, crowded. A man offered her his seat. She took it gratefully.

The man, middle-aged and obviously dyspeptic, said, "I'm afraid we're going to miss the eight-five." But the bus caught it with a few seconds to spare; and she just managed to squeeze herself between two more men, who were both smoking pipes, and trying to read the morning papers they had bought at the station by the faint lights above their heads.

"And to think," mused Gale, "that I used to look forward to railroad journeys."

Ten minutes afterwards, the people in the corner seats let up the shades. As usual, it was foggy, and freezing cold. Memory flicked back eight years. A very different train had just pulled out of New Orleans. Sunshine blazed on the last of the town as she watched it from the observation platform, on the levees, and the league-broad river. "How lucky I am," she had thought then, "to have gotten me a job in New

York." And how lucky she had thought herself—that other day, with the sunshine hot on Fifth Avenue—to have gotten herself a job in Europe. She had even thought herself lucky when she first met Marcus, when he began to make love to her. Marcus had been nicer then. Or hadn't he? Had she just deluded herself because she wanted some man—any man?—to make love to her? Was this, this extraordinary feeling for William, only a similar delusion?

"Snap out of it," she ordered herself; but without much effect.

Why had she jumped at the excuse of a late appointment at the Fantastic for spending the night in London? She could have caught the seven o'clock down easily. And why—why on earth—had she written that letter to William? Throwing herself at his head that way. Risking a snub that way. They—she—ought to be thinking things over. She'd told him so. He'd agreed with her. It was Michael who counted. Her son came first. He must always come first.

But in three or four years Michael must go to boarding school. How lonely she'd be then. How lonely she was now. What a life. These wretched railroad journeys. These horrible pipes. This miserable war . . .

2

. . . Since this miserable war the London tubes had become as bad as the New York subway in the rush hours—worse, because people slept on the platforms all night, and, in the morning, one could still smell the odour of them, mingled with disinfectant.

"Taxi," called Gale, jostled by the crowd that surged past the ticket collector at Marylebone. "Taxi."

But a young couple were already running for that last taxi; and she had to walk a good two hundred yards through slush and drizzle before she saw one cruising, and was driven to Helen Stannard's.

"Are you spending the night in town, Miss Johnson?"

asked Phoebe, the blond receptionist, eyeing the suitcase. Answering, "Yes. I am," Gale thought, "What business is it of yours anyway?" and felt peculiarly selfconscious. Why was she spending the night in town? Only to dine with William. But supposing William were unable to dine with her?

"There's a note for you, Miss Johnson," went on Phoebe. "I found it in the letter box."

She read the note before she changed into her overall; and excitement succeeded selfconsciousness. It was "all rot"—write William—about them going somewhere cheap. Pay for herself indeed. This would be his party. He'd fetch her. They might have just one drink at his quarters before they went on to dinner. And how about a spot of dancing? Or didn't she care for dancing? Bless William, this was no snub.

That Wednesday morning Gale had two clients, both oldish women who talked incessantly till one put on the mud packs. "When I'm old," she thought, "I shan't bother with beauty treatments." The second client gave her an envelope, saying, "It's just a little Christmas present for you, my dear, because you always take such a lot of trouble with me."

It was nearly two o'clock by then. Gale opened the envelope; and, finding a five-pound note inside, decided to lunch at the Berkeley Buttery instead of at her usual teashop. With coffee, she bought herself—rare luxury—a pack of imported American cigarettes.

Smoking at leisure—her only other appointment was the one with Elvira Ogilvy at the Fantastic—she strove to quell the mounting excitement which had arisen from overmuch considering of one particular Englishman, William, by considering the English in general. How much one admired their courage, their endurance. Yet how they could irritate one, with their sloth, with their complacency, with their lack of imagination, with their certainty that they were bound to win this war. They couldn't win decisively—they might even lose, though of course one daren't tell them so—without America.

And how mad they made one, giving cigarettes and cups of tea to the wounded aviators who were murdering their

women and children, putting flowers on the graves of the dead aviators who had murdered their women and children, shouting sentimentally, "We can take it," instead of angrily, "We'll dish it out."

Why, even William—willy nilly, her thoughts returned to him—would have given a cigarette to that young assassin they'd caught at Manor Cottage. And sometimes, to hear him talk, one might imagine that his only interest in this war was personal. The way he grumbled. He was clever, though—much cleverer than the average Englishman. Soon or later he would find out who killed Marcus.

But did she want William to find out who killed Marcus? Surely not. The man was dead. He couldn't hurt her any more. Why should she have to think of him any more? She hadn't felt the same way about him as she was feeling about William. If he'd never promised to make her his wife, she might never have . . . But supposing William didn't want to make her his wife? Would that make any difference?

"It ought to," she thought. "But will it? How strong I shall have to be. How I shall have to act. But I don't want to act. I just want to be myself. Myself. Without anyone else to consider. Not even him. Not even Michael. Lordy, I never knew I was that selfish."

Thought stopped. Emotions flooded her. She looked round the buttery; realized that she was almost alone there; ground out the stub of her third cigarette; called for her bill; paid, and walked out into Berkeley Street.

The rain had cleared. With no suitcase for burden she walked rapidly up Hay Hill and back to Helen Stannard's.

"Mrs. Ogilvy just phoned," said Phoebe. "The dinner's half an hour earlier than she thought. She wants you to go round rightaway. Oh, and a gentleman phoned from the Air Ministry. He said—I've got it all written down—could he have the address as well as the phone number because a lot of Flaxman numbers are out of order. I heard that too. They say the exchange was blitzed last night. Oh, and he said that if you were too busy to ring up yourself would I do it. He

didn't give me his name, only the number of his extension. He said he'd make a point of being there himself.

"He sounded ever so nice, Miss Johnson," continued Phoebe, relapsing into the vernacular, as Gale wrote down her Chelsea address.

3

Imagination suggested to Gale, as a taxi decanted her at the Fantastic, that she would have done better to phone William herself. This suggestion made her a little panicky. "But William will find out that address somehow or other," she decided. "Because he's that sort."

A porter took her suitcase, and the two scarlet "beauty boxes" stamped in gold with Helen Stannard's cypher. She parked the suitcase; and was escorted to the lift, in which she encountered a foreign-looking man who eyed the beauty boxes through a monocle.

"You look like a government messenger," he said. "Carrying dispatches."

Gale smiled, but did not answer. The lift stopped. The escorting page piped, "This way, miss"; and led along a bright, softly carpeted corridor to the door of a suite which a foreign maid opened to his knock.

"Please to come," said the maid; and led on into a big bedroom, all silk, mirrors and flowers.

"See that Miss Johnson has everything she wants, Katinka." Elvira Ogilvy, seated at her dressing table, spoke over one shoulder. The maid showed Gale the ornate bathroom; was asked to bring a kettle of boiling water—and withdrew. Ten minutes later, Gale was plying her sterilised tweezers. Unlike most clients, this one hardly talked at all.

"Queer woman," Gale caught herself thinking. "Really lovely. Natural blond. I wonder how old she is. Might be forty-two. Lady? Perhaps. Nice feet. Ugly hands. Pays cash. Been with us six months. And nobody knows a thing about her."

"That hurt," said her client.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ogilvy."

"Never mind. As long as you get them out."

Gale finished the upper lip, and began plucking the eyebrows.

"Do you speak French?" asked her client.

"No, I'm afraid not."

"What a pity. Everyone should speak French in your business. I started life in a beauty parlour, and I always used to. Often, I pretended to be a Frenchwoman. Especially with Americans. I found that it impressed them. Would you like a drink?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Ogilvy."

"Well, I would. Do you mind ringing for the waiter? When he comes tell him to bring me a double sidecar."

Pressing the cream and gold bellpush, Gale thought, "She'll tell me some more about herself when she's had her cocktail." And Mrs. Ogilvy, who had not been christened Elvira, did.

"You've been wasting your time, my dear," she said—that was after her second sidecar, also a double. "How old are you? Twenty-five, I should say. Why, by the time I was your age, I'd been married twice. I'd been in love, too. But that doesn't pay. You've got to fool 'em, and you've got to keep on fooling 'em, and you can't do that if you're too fond of 'em. By the way, this talk's between ourselves. You're not to pass it on to the other girls."

"Of course not, Mrs. Ogilvy."

"They're British. I haven't much use for the British. Their men don't really care for women. They prefer spending their money on sport. I should say you've massaged my throat just about enough. The throat's terribly important. That's where age shows first. Not that age matters as much as most people think. It's brains that count in the long run. Brains. And knowing how to look after one's money when one's earned, I mean acquired it. My first husband was an investment broker. He taught me a lot. Let's stop and have a cigarette, shall we? Or are you in a fearful hurry?"

"I'd rather finish if you don't mind, Mrs. Ogilvy."

"All right. Only don't call me Mrs. Ogilvy. My name's Elvira, though it didn't start out that way. What's yours? Gale. Then you won't have to change it. There's a lot in a girl's name. If ever I'd had a daughter . . . But then one can't have everything. And who'd want a child at a time like this anyway?"

4

It was twenty-five minutes to seven by the time Gale stepped out of a dark bus into a street still darker, with an icy wind whipping the rain against her ankles. Contrasting Elvira Ogilvy's life with her own, she was shocked to find so much in favour of Elvira's.

"I expect, though," she thought, "that one must have a special aptitude for that profession."

But, as she let herself into her friend's flat with the latch-key she found under the doormat, she thought, "It can't be a special aptitude. It must be latent in every woman. Only most of us only want to use it for one man. Lordy, I wish she hadn't said what she did about British men. Perhaps she's right. Perhaps they don't really care for women. And William is British. I can't get over that."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I

ALL that Wednesday, Wordsworth—so busy on routine jobs that he could only snatch half an hour to bring his dossier up to date with a précis of the scene at Boulte's flat—had been inwardly apprehensive. To his original apprehension, that nobody would consent to take night duty for him—quelled by Guy's, "My dear chap, of course I'll function, though I can't say it'll be a pleasure"—had succeeded a fear, brought on by the telephone operator's, "Flaxman. I'm sorry. But we don't seem to be able to get any Flaxman numbers this morning"—that he would not be able to find Gale's address. There had been other apprehensions, too, trivial in themselves, but possibly cumulative in their effect.

For now, at half past five, with his last telephone call put through and his last paper before him, he grew aware that his imagination was trying to warn him of some catastrophe which nobody else had foreseen, and which only he himself might be able to prevent.

Twice before, he had experienced this particular, and very peculiar, awareness—the first time on a flight over the enemy's lines during the previous war, and the second time while on a shooting trip in the hinterland of Cape Remittance. In each case—subconsciously prepared, as it seemed afterwards, for the requisite action—he had been able to save a life.

"But I never knew what I was preparing for," he remembered; and, suddenly as it had fallen on him, the awareness vanished, and imagination petered out.

He picked up his last paper, which had only just arrived by hand with a covering note from Prисworthy and was headed, "Time Bombs."

"Here's the dope I promised you," Prisworthy had scribbled. "Let me have it back as soon as ever you can."

The second sentence was underlined. Wordsworth passed the paper across the desk, saying, "You might have this copied, tonight, Guy. It looks a bit long, and I want to study it carefully."

"Right you are, W.W. Are you toddling off now?"

"Yes. I may as well. Thanks again for taking my night duty. I'll do your next one of course."

And Wordsworth, his imagination beginning to work again—he'd be with Gale by seven!—dressed himself for the street.

2

Minnie Mouse's fabric roof flapped to the wind as Wordsworth braked her to ask the way of a policeman, his gasmask still slung behind him for sign there had been no alert.

Having been told, "First right, second left, about halfway down the street on the right hand side," he drove on again, glad as always to be in plain clothes.

The block of flats in which Gale was spending the night looked low and flimsy of construction. "I shouldn't be too happy if she were living here," he thought. "Steel and concrete is the only stuff nowadays."

He dished Minnie Mouse's engine, made his way through the unattended entrance, and walked upstairs to a door marked "12a." A girl in the dark blue of the Auxiliary Fire Service opened to his ring.

"Gale won't be long," she said. "I'm just off. But you'll be all right in the sitting room."

She indicated the sitting room, and went off, banging the door behind her. Pulses beating a little, Wordsworth walked to the fireplace, in which coalite burned with a dull glow, and warmed himself gratefully. London winters were the very devil. He caught his imagination yearning for the tropics. Why shouldn't he return to Cape Remittance after the war?

Gale entered while he was still visualising his old bungalow, and the shadows of his pepper trees lengthening across the compound as the red ball of the sun dropped to a shimmering horizon beyond Banana Bay.

"Why, you're not in uniform," said Gale.

Hatless, she herself wore her favourite black and white. He thought, when their hands met, that he had never seen her look so young.

"A spot of fire fighting we had last night," he explained, "didn't do my last remaining pair of trousers much good. And anyway I always change out of uniform when I can."

"You look different in mufti." Her golden brown eyes were inspecting him.

"Plain clothes, please—not mufti."

"Why?"

"I don't know. But one just doesn't use that word."

"One of the things that just aren't done! You can't help being British, can you, William?"

She laughed; and threw away the cigarette she had been smoking when she came in.

"I can't offer you a drink," she went on. "Eileen's a teetotaler. She's rather a magnificent person. Didn't you think her very good-looking?"

"I only saw her for a moment. Does she work at Helen Stannard's too?"

"No. She's got her own business. Lampshades. But of course they're doing terribly. Eileen doesn't think she'll be able to carry on much longer. It's a such a shame. She's worked so hard, and she was doing so well till this war started."

It struck Wordsworth that Gale was only talking about her friend to conceal her thoughts.

"Shall we be off?" he asked.

"Where are we going?"

"First to my flat, just for a drink; then to the Trianon. I've booked a table in the ballroom. It's about the safest place in London."

"But oughtn't I to be in evening dress?"

"My dear girl, hardly anybody dresses nowadays."

"Any why need we go to your flat, William?"

"I thought you wanted to see it."

"Wouldn't some other time do?"

"We shan't be there long."

His words seemed to reassure her. She laughed again, admitting, "I am just a little curious to see where you live."

Pulses beating once more, he helped her into a fur coat.

"This is Eileen's," she said. "I never bring mine up. It's too precious."

They came into the street to find the rain had stopped. He helped her mount the tiny car.

"Why did you have to spend the night in London?" he asked.

"I had a late appointment."

"You don't often stay up, do you?"

"No. This is the first time in months."

She seemed curiously aloof. Almost, it was as though they were strangers. Yet once, they had kissed.

Twelve minutes of cautious driving, during which this aloofness did not diminish, brought them to his own building. The porter opened the lift for them, and took them up. Her face, seen sideways in the small mirror fastened to the back of the lift cage, was unsmiling. "She's sorry she came," he thought—and his pulses ceased to beat.

The cage stopped. They went along the landing to his own door. He opened it, and ushered her through the hall into the little sitting room, tidy now, its plain curtains and covers clean, its mahogany polished, and a fire in the grate.

"Rather on the small side," he began. "But the bedroom and bathroom are pretty decent. And it's got a kitchenette, with an electric stove and a refrigerator."

"Ice box, please. Not refrigerator."

"Why?"

"I don't know. But one just doesn't use that word."

"You can't help being American, can you, Gale?"

He laughed, and she laughed back at him. No longer did they seem such strangers.

"In the ice box," he said slowly, "there is a shaker. In the shaker, there are cocktails. I'll go and get them."

Alone, Gale inspected the room, thinking, "It isn't like a home. Perhaps, though, he wouldn't care for a home. Oh dear, I hope he doesn't try to make love to me."

But did she really hope that?

He came back carrying the shaker, and filled the two glasses on the mahogany centre table.

"Here's fun," he said. Drinking, she thought, "That's all he wants, I expect"; and again she remembered Elvira Ogilvy's, "British men don't really care for women." How much did she herself care? Too much for her peace of mind anyway. How good-looking the man was, how slim in that dark blue suit.

They sat and talked trivialities, while they emptied their glasses.

"Dividend?" he asked.

"Just a drop, William. I'm afraid I'm not a very good drinker."

He refilled his own glass to the brim; and sipped it thoughtfully.

"We're lucky there's no raid," he said. "I hope you don't want to be home too early. It's extension night at the Trianon. How's Michael? I ought to have asked you before."

"Michael's fine. Oughtn't we to be off soon, William?"

"Oh, there's no hurry. Have a cigarette?"

He held his lighter for her. Their hands just touched. Nice hands, he had. Well kept, too, but how little she really knew about him.

"Tell me something," she said suddenly.

"Anything you like?"

"Do you run to a lot of relatives?"

"There's an aunt." He told her about his aunt, who lived in Wales. "And a cousin or two." But he'd never "hit it off"

with his cousins, and otherwise he was "pretty well alone in the world."

"You like that, don't you?"

"Up to a point. Families, in my experience, can be a bit of a nuisance."

"I haven't seen my family in years."

They were on dangerous ground; and both knew it. Her instinct was for safety; his for more danger.

"We could have dined here," he said suddenly. "But the food isn't anything to write home about."

"Do you dine here often?"

"Oh, occasionally."

The telephone rang while he was speaking. He rose, answered and recradled the instrument saying, "Wrong number." He approached her chair. Automatically she put down her glass. His lean hand covered her plump one.

"Would you like to dine here one night, Gale?"

"I don't think so, William."

A current of emotion ran through her, ran through both of them. She saw his face stooping, felt her own upturning. Then their lips had met, and he was kissing her, and she was kissing him back, hard, very hard, losing herself in his kisses.

"No," she heard herself say. "No. Not any more. You'll muss my hair. You'll——"

Her lungs seemed empty of breath. She knew herself all one weakness in his hands; knew that he could do anything he liked with her. But he didn't know that. He was releasing her. His lips had lifted. She could breathe again. She heard herself say, "You oughtn't to have done that, William."

"Perhaps I oughtn't. But I'm damn glad I did. I love you like hell, Gale. I wish to God we weren't going out for our dinner."

"Well, we are going out." She rose on the words. "And I don't think I like you much when you use bad language to me."

"About how much do you like me?"

"Quite a lot, as long as you behave yourself."

She managed to take the comb and mirror from her bag on the table. She managed to keep her hands quite steady while she tidied herself.

What had that Ogilvy woman said? You've got to fool 'em, and you've got to keep on fooling 'em.

"As long as you behave yourself," repeated Gale.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I

THE underground ballroom, now converted into the main restaurant, of the Hotel Trianon was nearly full by the time a maître d'hôtel escorted Gale and Wordsworth to their table. Most of the men, and a good proportion of the women, wore uniform—khaki jackets and mess jackets, the dark blue of the Navy, the light blue of the Air Force. Here, Norwegian was being spoken, here Polish, here French. At tables adjoining theirs sat Australians, Canadians, and three American boys from the newly formed Eagle Squadron accompanied by three officers of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

"I didn't know London was as gay as this," said Gale.

They made their choice of dishes, and Wordsworth ordered a bottle of champagne. The strength of his recent emotions still surprised him. How close he had been to proposing marriage. She might have accepted marriage. She might even have accepted the alternative. Or mightn't she? One never knew where one was with a woman. What a relief to be in public.

Gale, too, was glad to be in public. One could act so much better before an audience. She began to make conversation. He followed her leads. He told her a story, which was not quite "drawing room." She had heard it before, rather more crudely; but pretended she hadn't.

The band began one of her favourite tunes.

"Do you like music?" she asked.

"Not very much, I'm afraid."

"What do you like?"

"Oh, sport. And I read quite a lot. I used to like my work, too. I was more or less on my own as a policeman, you see. Do you like being at Helen Stannard's?"

"Not particularly. But at least it makes me independent."

"What do you actually do there?"

"Lots of things you wouldn't know about."

"Such as?"

She burked the question with a smile, and applied herself to the food. Marvellous appetite, the girl had. How healthy she was. Life at Cape Remittance would suit her down to the ground. It wouldn't suit Michael, though. And there were no decent schools. Blast it, why must there be Michael? One wouldn't hesitate otherwise. Or would one? Money had to be considered. It wouldn't run to many evenings like this if he tied himself up with a wife.

Gale was still eating. He looked about him. Couples had begun to dance. That was a damn pretty woman in the plum-coloured evening frock. There were lots of pretty women in the world. Liked her independence, did she? A wife could be too independent. And she was an American. Reggie Howes had married an American woman. And a nice mess she'd made of his existence. Reggie had been as gay as a lark and as strong as a horse while he stayed single. Full of money, too. Nice estate up country. Plane of his own. Yacht in the bay. Trips home whenever he felt like 'em.

Ye gods. Ye gods and little fishes. There was Mrs. Reggie.

"Who *are* you staring at, William?" asked Gale.

2

The woman whom Wordsworth had recognised danced away and was hidden by a pillar.

"Someone I used to know in Cape Remittance," he told Gale. "She married a pal of mine. As it happens, I was best man at their wedding. The poor devil shot himself after about a year of it. Half a mo. I think they're just coming round again. Yes. That's Mrs. Reggie, all right. The blonde in the green dress dancing with that foreign-looking bloke in the eyeglass."

Half turning, Gale recognised both dancers. One was Elvira

Ogilvy; the other the man who had said, "You look like a government messenger carrying dispatches."

"That's queer," she said, turning to Wordsworth again. "I know that woman, too. She's a client of ours. As a matter of fact I was attending to her this evening. What was your friend's name?"

"Howes. And hers was—let me think—oh, yes, Ogilvy."

"She still calls herself Ogilvy."

"Well, I know what I call her. She's poison, Gale. Straight poison."

His eyes were black fires. She had never realised him capable of such anger.

"Even in Cape Remittance," he went on, "we draw the line somewhere. And we drew it at Mrs. Reggie about a month after the funeral. I went to the Resident myself, and told him she'd simply got to go. But she took Reggie's money with her. All that was left of it, anyway. And the French consul—he'd been playing round with her before Reggie killed himself—caught the same boat."

Elvira Ogilvy and her partner came near again while Wordsworth was adding a few more details to the story. But she made no sign that she had recognised either of them; and, slowly, the fires died from Wordsworth's eyes.

"Sorry," he apologised. "I oughtn't to have let myself go like that. What on earth are you doing, my dear?"

For Gale had taken a pound note from her bag, and was slowly shredding the paper into little pieces.

"Elvira Ogilvy gave it to me this evening," she said. "I was going to buy something for Michael with it. Can I have a drop more champagne and a cigarette, please, William?"

Momentarily her face had lost much of its beauty. He remembered a similar change in her when she had been driving that ambulance to Smart's Farm.

3

A few minutes later Gale seemed her normal self. But in Wordsworth old memories were still working. What had

Reggie been trying to hint at in his last letter—the sealed one they'd found in his safe? Nothing of importance probably. The poor chap had been drinking like a fish for weeks before he shot himself. And he'd never been particularly bright.

The past vanished; and the present began to obsess Wordsworth. This woman who sat so close to him was Gale. He wanted her. He wanted her like hell. But did he want her enough to marry her? Never mind that. It could wait. This tune couldn't.

"Let's dance," he said.

"But we haven't had our coffee yet."

"The waiter'll keep it hot for us."

There was a touch of impatience, a touch of mastery in his voice. She followed him on to the floor, finding that he danced well, better than she had expected, far better than most Englishmen.

"That was nice," she said when they returned to their table. "Let's do some more of it."

"Have a spot more champagne first."

"I don't mind if I do."

The wine loosened most of the inhibitions which had been troubling her since their kisses. Why shouldn't she enjoy herself for once? Life was pretty humdrum, and pretty lonely. She didn't often meet anyone she liked as well as William. Had she ever met anyone she liked as well as William? Of course she hadn't. But he mustn't know that.

"Or ought I to tell him?" she asked herself, dancing again to a slow rhythm which helped one to think. "He told me he was in love with me. If he tells me that again—and I can easily make him—oughtn't I to say, 'I'm in love with you, too, only it can't be just fun, because I'm not made that way'?"

But would William believe her? One couldn't blame him if he thought about . . . Marcus.

"Why did you do it?" asked conscience. "It makes things so difficult, when they ought to be so lovely."

Then the threads of introspection snapped; and, for a full hour, during which they never caught sight of Elvira Ogilvy, she gave herself up to pleasure—to the pleasure of William's touch, of their bodies moving in unison, of trivial questions and easy answers, of his comments about this couple or that couple, seated at nearby tables or encountered on the floor.

"How much people interest you," she said as they waited for the short cabaret.

"Aren't most people interested in people, Gale?"

"I often wonder. It's largely superficial, I think."

"Meaning that most of us are more interested in ourselves than anybody else."

"Well, aren't we?"

"Yes. I suppose so."

Their eyes met. Again they were on dangerous ground. Again his instinct was to see more danger.

"But that doesn't apply in my case," he went on. "You'd be surprised how much I think about you. Especially when you're not there."

"Now you've got to act," Gale said to herself; and aloud, smiling:

"That doesn't sound exactly like a compliment, William."

"Possibly. But it's the truth."

"I hope you think of me nicely."

He drank the rest of the one brandy he had ordered; and his eyes twinkled at her.

"You ought to have a pretty shrewd idea of the way I think of you by now," he answered.

"But we haven't only ourselves to think of."

Lordy, why on earth had she said that? He'd taken her meaning at once. He was so clever. Better if he'd been a little more stupid.

"So you've said before," he retorted, with no twinkle in his eyes.

The opening of the cabaret saved the tiny situation. Afterwards they danced once more, speaking very little, until she confessed herself too tired to go on.

"I think I'd like to go home soon," she said "I was up rather early this morning."

"All right, I'll get the bill. Waiter——"

But before the waiter, busy at a nearby table, could come to theirs, Gale saw Elvira Ogilvy sailing towards them, smiling at them across the half empty floor.

4

"You are Colonel Wordsworth, aren't you?" smiled Elvira Ogilvy. "Don't you remember me? You were best man at my wedding."

She nodded to Gale as though to say, "Fancy your being with him," while Wordsworth—one had no option—rose and just touched her hand.

"Of course I remember you, Mrs. Reggie."

His tone—Gale noticed—was very cold. But the blond woman in the green frock did not seem to notice the implied snub.

"I heard you were in the R.A.F.," she went on.

"Who from?"

"I really can't remember. You are in the Air Force, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"And you're stationed in London, I believe. I've been here since May. At the Fantastic. I spent last winter in Paris. It's terrible about the poor French, don't you think? I say, have you a cigarette on you?"

Wordsworth's case lay on the table. Perforce, he picked it up and clicked it open.

"Thanks most awfully," went on Elvira Ogilvy.

The waiter, now free, approached and struck a match for her.

"My bill," said Wordsworth.

"But surely you're not going yet, Colonel Wordsworth. It's only just after one. What I really came over for was to ask you two if you wouldn't join me and my friend, Baron

Kovac, in a drink. Please do. Try and persuade him for me, Gale."

She smiled again, blowing a puff of smoke through her slightly flared nostrils; but her blue eyes were hard and purposeful. "Trying to make use of me just because she's a client," decided Gale, appreciating the tact of Wordsworth's, "Miss Johnson's rather tired, and so am I, Mrs. Reggie. So if you don't mind——"

"But I do mind. The baron knows Cape Remittance quite well, and he is most anxious to meet you. If you're tired, we won't keep you more than a few minutes."

In the slight pause which followed, Gale thought, "She can't have had much to drink since those double sidecars; she's cold sober now anyway," and wondered what William might be thinking. But William Wordsworth, in that moment, did not think at all; because—for the second time within a few hours—he was experiencing his own particular and peculiar awareness.

"Don't go on refusing," ordered that awareness.

"Very well, Mrs. Reggie, as long as it is only for a few minutes," he said, his voice still cold, "only I'd rather pay my bill first."

The waiter brought a third chair; Elvira Ogilvy sat down. Immediately, one of the Eagle Squadron boys came over, and, grasping her by the hand, greeted her warmly. She introduced him.

"Miss Johnson's an American, too," she said; and he said, "Fine. What's your State, Miss Johnson? I'm from Nebraska."

Watching them while they chatted, Wordsworth experienced a twinge of jealousy. "Why the blazes didn't I say no and stick to it?" he thought. For the awareness had vanished again; and, as he scrutinised the account the waiter brought him, paid it and counted his change, he could only remember Reggie's body, lying face downward where the blood had coagulated on the teak floor.

The American pilot said, "So long, Elvira. Good night,

Miss Johnson. I hope I'll be seeing you one of these days." Wordsworth and Gale followed Elvira Ogilvy among the tables towards an alcove in the farthest corner of the underground room. A girl in a camel's hair coat with a silk scarf round her head was just leaving that alcove. Wordsworth, walking behind his two companions, watched that girl move away up the staircase and noticed that she wore slacks. "Couldn't be," he thought. "Just a resemblance. They all look alike in that get-up."

The girl disappeared round the barrier of sandbags which guarded the lift. As Elvira reached the alcove Baron Kovac rose from the table and adjusted his monocle. Dark and slightly bald, he wore a dinner jacket and a red carnation. He spoke English well; but, after the first few conventional sentences, with a distinctive accent. Wordsworth judged him in his middle forties. The baron bent his head and kissed Gale's hand saying, "We have met before. Do you not remember?"

"I can't say I do."

"This evening. In the elevator at the Fantastic. I asked you about the boxes you were carrying."

"Why, of course."

Gale, pleased with her little piece of acting, took the sofa seat he offered, but refused "a little glass of tokay, the best wine of my country."

"I'd rather have water," she said.

"The national drink of your country," smiled the baron. "I know it well. I was five years in Washington."

He began to talk to her about America. Wordsworth, at the other end of the sofa, decided to sample the tokay.

"Do you work at the Air Ministry?" asked Elvira Ogilvy. "Yes."

"That must be very interesting. I know a lot of men at the Ministry. Let me see, who do I know there?" She mentioned various names, among them Quaritch's, and Ramsay's. "Oh, and I knew poor Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown. Such a

pity, his dying. Can you tell me how it happened? Nobody seems quite certain, though I did hear it was a shell."

"A bomb, surely?" put in the baron, breaking off his talk with Gale, who was a little surprised at Wordsworth's:

"I'm afraid I can't enlighten you about that."

For an appreciable moment, conversation seemed to flag. Then the baron resumed his American reminiscences, and Elvira Ogilvy asked:

"Did you come home specially to join up, Colonel Wordsworth?"

"No. I retired six months before war broke out."

"What's your rank in the Air Force?"

He told her, and continued, "That's why I don't call myself colonel any more."

"But you are one."

"Only in the Cape Remittance Defence Force."

He finished his wine, and caught Gale's eye.

"Don't you think we ought to be going?" he asked.

"Yes. I really am tired."

She rose. The baron kissed her hand again; Wordsworth rose and shook Elvira's.

"Do come to see me at the Fantastic, I'm nearly always visible between five and seven," said Elvira Ogilvy before they escaped.

5

"Why did she invite us to have that drink?" asked Gale, as Wordsworth drove slowly along the Embankment.

"I wouldn't know that."

"Why didn't you refuse, considering you hate her so much?"

"I wouldn't know that either."

"Don't try to talk American, William. It doesn't suit you. What did you make of the baron?"

"I hardly spoke to the fellow. What did you make of him?"

"I thought he was"—Gale fumbled for the next words—"a bit slimy."

They drove up Northumberland Avenue in silence, and were halted by the amber cross of the hooded traffic lights. At Admiralty Arch, a sentry flashed a screened torch, and put his head through the window when Wordsworth lowered it.

"You'll have to go round by Piccadilly, sir," said the sentry, looking at his pass. "Special orders."

Halfway along Piccadilly, Wordsworth took his left hand from the steering wheel, and laid it on Gale's knee.

"Enjoyed yourself?" he asked.

"Very much. Except for that last quarter of an hour."

"Was that"—his pulses were active again—"the only part you didn't enjoy?"

She did not answer; but he could feel her knee tremble.

"Tell me," he persisted.

"Why?"

"Because I particularly want you to."

"All right," she put a hand over his, and her knee steadied, "I will tell you. Though you won't like me for it. I did enjoy everything except that last quarter of an hour. Including our . . . our drink at your flat. But—and it's a fairly large but, in fact there's no getting over it—I've made one mistake in my life, and I'm not going to make another, William."

"I see."

Her hand was removed. He drove on in silence. "Does he really see?" she wondered. Then his hand was removed, and a little shiver ran through her; and she heard herself say, "I'm sorry, William. But it's no good my not being straight with you."

"No. I suppose not."

Silent again, they reached Sloane Street and he turned down it, thinking, "I suppose I ought to be straight with her. But I'm too angry. Curse this sex business. It makes one so damned unreasonable when one wants a woman as much as I do and can't get her."

"I knew you'd be cross with me," said Gale.

His mood softened. What did he want her to be—a tart like that Ogilvy woman?

"I'm not a bit cross," he lied; and in that moment he was within an ace of proposing marriage. But the last scruples still held. All his life, he'd funk'd marriage. And at his age, with this war on, with Michael in the background . . . No, it'd be just crazy, the sort of thing chaps did, after knowing a girl only a fortnight, in the previous war.

They were close to their destination. They had reached it, and he was helping her out.

"Got your latchkey?" he asked.

"It's under the mat."

"Well, I'll just come upstairs with you."

"All right. If you insist. But you mustn't come in."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll wake Eileen."

"Isn't she still on duty?"

"No. She comes off at midnight."

The entrance hall was in semi-darkness. He took her arm as they passed through it and up the staircase to the door marked "12a." Releasing herself, she stooped, and felt under the doormat; rose and faced him, the key in her hand.

It was so dark here that he could only see the shape of her face and a vague gleam of hair.

"Good night," she whispered, and turned from him to insert the key.

He bent forward and put his arms loosely round her. He kissed the top of her head. She left the key in the lock, and faced him again.

"Please," she whispered. "I'm so tired."

"Just one, Gale."

"Just one then, William."

Her mouth met his in a long full-lipped kiss, which left their eyes swimming and their bodies atremble. Presently he heard the key turn, and Eileen's voice call sleepily, "Is that you, Gale?"

Then the door had closed; and he was making his way downstairs.

6

The luminous hands of the pigskin clock on Wordsworth's dressing table pointed the quarter to three. "Hell of a mess about Gale," he thought. "I've either got to quit or go through with it."

And after that, just for a second or so, he caught himself thinking of Mrs. Reggie, and that incomprehensible letter in Reggie's safe. A poisonous woman—and a bare-faced liar. Why the approach? Why the persistence? Why the excuse that her foreign boy friend knew Cape Remittance and he was anxious to meet one? He'd hardly spoken to one.

And why the curiosity about Ashdown? Mrs. Reggie had been trying to pump one about Ashdown. The baron had said, "A bomb, surely." Why the blazes had he said that? Who was the baron?

"A nasty piece of work anyway," decided Wordsworth; and fell asleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I

FROM nine-fifty until nine-fifty-five on that Thursday morning which followed Wordsworth's night out with Gale, even Guy Conington, accustomed to the proverbial profanity of a certain newspaper office, was a little thrilled by the stream of steady blasphemy flowing from his squadron leader's lips.

Many of the curses were unintelligible—either Arabic or Urdu or that peculiar clicking dialect he had first heard spoken in Cape Remittance. But every now and again W.W. would relapse into an English compared with whose red vehemence that of the Elizabethans or the eighteenth-century dramatists seemed as milkily pure as a leader in the *Daily Telegraph* or the *Times*.

"But dash it all, old chap," Guy Conington interrupted when his squadron leader at last paused for breath, "dash it all, what else could I have done? Daddy Dorland gave me a direct order——"

Whereupon W.W. consigned both him and Daddy Dorland to the nethermost depths of what appeared to be a Central African pit; and, having suggested a suitable pastime for them in that salubrious locality, fumed on: "You might at least have waited till I got here before you let him have the blasted thing."

"I certainly might have, if Daddy hadn't happened to turn up fifteen minutes early, and you hadn't happened to be three quarters of an hour late. And anyway"—Guy's temper, too, was fraying a little for lack of breakfast and those other amenities which refresh after a night on duty—"it's no good

your trying to come the superior officer over me, W.W., because Daddy's your superior officer, and if he tells me to do something I've ruddy well got to do it."

"You ought to have telephoned me."

"All right. I ought to have telephoned you. But I didn't. So what? So I'll go and get something to eat, squadron leader; and perhaps you'll take the trouble to read what I've written—instead of just cursing my lights out—before I come back."

Guy Conington, already gloved and great coated, with his gasmask over his shoulder, went out. Alone, Wordsworth swore on, in a mixture of Zulu and Swahili, for a full minute longer. Of all the accursed stupidities, of all the infernal bad luck.

Finally, the worst of his rage petered out; and he began to consider the potential catastrophe—for something had warned him, from the very moment Guy began, "Just after you left last night, W.W., Daddy rang up," that this might be catastrophe—a little more objectively.

Seen objectively—barring always the fact that Guy ought to have telephoned before he obeyed Daddy's order—one had only oneself to blame.

"If I hadn't been so keen to go out with Gale," he thought, "if I hadn't swapped night duty with Guy, if I'd been here to talk to Daddy, if I hadn't overslept, even if that new fellow who brought me my breakfast hadn't mucked up his orders, the thing couldn't have happened."

But the thing had happened; so one might as well know the worst.

He took up a copy of the report which Guy, acting on Daddy Dorland's instructions ("It took me the best part of three hours to do the draft, W.W., and another two hours to correct it"), had dictated from his own dossier; and read the paragraphs slowly through, thinking as he turned the various pages, "I wouldn't have said that," "Or that either."

On the whole, though, Guy might have made a worse hash; and, except for Ashdown's, he had mentioned no names,

George Ramsay being "X," and Boulte "Y" and the Dowdys "Z1" and "Z2" throughout. Various items of evidence, too—among them, the scene at Boulte's flat—had been omitted; and other points left purposely vague.

All the same, this document was dynamite. While the fact that five copies—three of which were even now ("He came busting in here and took 'em away himself, W.W.") with Daddy Dorland—had been typed in the pool where any Jane, Jean or Jennifer might have read them, horrified all the policeman in William Wordsworth.

Could one imagine such carelessness anywhere outside the Air Ministry? Could one imagine it at Scotland Yard?

2

The black telephone rang while Wordsworth was re-reading the report, which Guy, to his additional horror, had signed "For Squadron Leader." Answering it, he heard Millicent Ashdown at her most artificial. She rather wanted to see him again. It would be so nice if he could come in for a drink that evening. He couldn't promise? Oh dear, what a pity. Well, perhaps he could tell her something. Naturally she was very anxious to know if he had found out anything . . . well, anything definite.

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Ashdown."

"It is taking a time, isn't it? I'm afraid you're thinking I'm terribly impatient. But you will let me know as soon as you can, won't you? Promise me."

He promised, and hung up. What a nuisance women were. Take even Gale. If it hadn't been for Gale, one wouldn't be in this mess. Because, damn it, one was in a mess. Daddy would never keep Guy's report to himself. He'd "circulate" it. And once it began circulating . . .

Two lines from "Sniff" occurred to Wordsworth. "If you can only fill the unfiled minute, To pass and pass and pass till Kingdom Come," he remembered; and, once more, his temper grew hot.

There were other documents on his desk, among them the copy of Prisworthy's paper headed, "Time Bombs." Thinking, "What's the use of getting in such a bate, the fat's in the fire anyway," he began reading that paper. Instantly his temper cooled.

This could be important. The Lord alone knew how important. Moreover it appeared curiously familiar. He seemed to have seen these letters and figures, he'd certainly seen this diagram, before. When? Only a day or so ago. Where? Why, at Boulte's flat, of course. This could be the very diagram, the very chart, which had been pinned to Boulte's desk, and burnt up with the rest of the evidence. It was, too. A glance at his notebook confirmed the fact that the reference letters and figures tallied.

Automatically he picked up the green telephone, asked for the War Office, and was put through to Prisworthy, who said, "Copies of that Time Bomb paper? Oh, I think they went to our whole distribution list. Half a minute, and I'll make certain"; and a little later, "Yes. Your flak people certainly had one, because Boulte came round to see me about it. He wanted to make out that we'd come to the wrong conclusion—he's always a bit that way—and that about a hundred hours is the longest delay possible. That's absurd, of course. Two hundred's more like it."

Two hundred hours. More than eight days. And George Ramsay had only been out of Room Twenty Eight for six days when Ashdown was killed.

"So where are we?" thought Wordsworth. "Just nowhere. Just back where we started," and, so thinking, looked up to see Izod, who said, "Good morning. Have you got a few minutes to spare?"

"Certainly. Take a pew."

Izod sat down, offered his cigarette case, and lit up after Wordsworth had refused with a truthful, "Thanks, but I've a bit of a head on me this morning."

"I had to send Tony home about three o'clock yesterday afternoon," began Izod. "And his mother's just telephoned

that his temperature's a hundred and three. I thought you'd better know that in case you wanted to get in touch with him."

"Thanks. Can I have the address and telephone number, please?"

Izod gave the information. Wordsworth, thinking, "I bet that's not what you really came for," wrote it down.

"That was a funny business the other evening," went on Izod.

"Very."

"Have you made up your mind what you're going to do about it?"

"No. Not yet."

They eyed each other. The green telephone rang. "Staveleigh speaking," the visitor managed to overhear. "Shall I go?" he asked.

Wordsworth shook his head; dealt with the call; hung up, and gave Izod Prисworthy's paper, suggesting:

"You've seen this before, I think?"

"Oh, yes. M.I. ten sent us a copy. As a matter of fact, they sent us two copies."

"Are both copies still in your possession?"

"I presume so."

"Could you make certain?"

Again, they eyed each other; and that time the visitor's eyes wavered. "Is it important?" he asked.

"It is rather. You see, Izod"—purposefully, Wordsworth hesitated—"one copy may have been destroyed. By fire. Take a look at the diagram. Doesn't it look rather familiar to you? It does to me. And I took a note of the reference number. You may remember my doing so."

"Yes, I remember." Izod's glance was steady again. "And I see what you're driving at. But even if one copy is missing it won't alter my opinion. Tony was pulling your leg the night before last. I'm almost positive about it."

The eternal telephone rang again. While Wordsworth was answering it, Izod left the room.

3

Guy Conington, returning before midday, drawled, "If this place weren't run like a madhouse, a chap who's been on night duty would have the next day off. I didn't get more than three hours' sleep altogether. Any news from our darling Daddy?"

"None so far."

"Was my stuff all right?"

"It might have been worse," admitted Wordsworth. "Who typed it for you? The girl friend?"

"And who might you imply by that?" Rather to Wordsworth's surprise, Guy flushed.

"Miss King, of course."

"She wasn't on duty last night. At least——"

"Go on, Guy." Rather to Conington's surprise. Wordsworth's demeanour had changed; and his next words, "What do you mean by 'At least'?" sounded peremptory.

"Nasty mood W.W.'s in this morning," thought Guy Conington. "I wonder if his bit of stuff turned him down last night." And he lit a cigarette before answering:

"My girl friend, as you erroneously call her, was only on duty till midnight."

Wordsworth did not question him further; and they carried on with various routine jobs till one o'clock, when Conington invited, "If you've got nothing better to do, come along to the Press Club."

"Thanks. But I've rather a lot to think about. So if you don't mind, Guy, I'll feed alone."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

I

THROUGHOUT lunch, eaten at a solitary table in his own club, Wordsworth managed to keep his mind on his work. The more he considered Prisworthy's paper, the more it seemed to implicate Ramsay; and the more he considered the report which Guy had handed to Dorland, the more he was aware of potential catastrophe. Just for a moment, too, while paying his bill at the desk, he re-experienced that strange awareness which had twice enabled him to save life.

Seated in the smoking room, however, all his thoughts turned to Gale; and, willy nilly, he was still thinking of her, not quite equably—a nuisance, being so much in love; made it so difficult to concentrate on one's work; how much better if one hadn't gone dancing last night—while he drove to the Air Ministry.

And even at his desk this problem of whether to marry or stay single—for she had made it fairly plain that there could be no pleasant alternative—continued to harass him, until Guy, putting his hand over the telephone mouthpiece, said: "It's Daddy. You're to go to his room at once."

2

Martin Dorland might have been the typical retired British officer of heavy cavalry as imagined by the typical light humorist of the British press. Factually, he had held his commission in a county regiment of footsloggers, leaving with the rank of major immediately after the First Round of the German War to serve the Air Ministry as a civilian ad-

ministrator. Pensioned off from the Air Ministry some eighteen months before the outbreak of Round Two, he had been dug out of his estate in Somerset and dressed up as a wingless group captain, complete with various medal ribbons which included the Order of King Stanislaus (known to the irreverent as "Lousy Annie") with Palms.

The pale azure of the R.A.F. uniform and the rich port wine hue of Dorland's thinning cheeks made an attractive colour-combination. His blue eyes goggled under golden eyebrows. The gold of his heavy dragoon moustache had faded to fine silver, which matched the sparse mane of carefully parted hair.

"Good afternoon to you, Wordsworth," he said without rising. "This is a pretty kettle of fish about Ashdown. I suppose he was murdered. Sit down and tell me what you think about it. I've read your paper, of course. I've a copy of it here. A bit obscure. But, in the circumstances, obscurity seems advisable. I'm sorry I had to call for it in such a hurry. But Quaritch insisted. He's passing it on. You know what the High-Ups are. They will have chapter and verse for everything."

So Quaritch—thought Wordsworth—had shrunk from the responsibility of not calling in the Yard.

He sat down; and, referring to his own copy of the report, began elaborating it.

"Who's X?" interrupted Daddy Dorland.

"Sir George Ramsay, sir."

"My dear fellow, surely you're not trying to tell me that Sir George Ramsay committed a murder. I mean, that's too preposterous."

Guy—thank goodness—had omitted the Paris trial; and skated very lightly over Ramsay's relations with Millicent Ashdown. Why he should have put in, "X, it is understood, leaves for America very shortly," goodness only knew.

"Sir George Ramsay—preposterous," repeated Daddy Dorland.

"I'm only suggesting he had the opportunity, sir," said

Wordsworth; and went on with his tale, till Dorland once more interrupted with:

"Y! Don't call him Y. Let's have his right name. Boulte, eh? Of course I know him. Known him for years. Hot-tempered devil. And you say he threatened to shoot Ash-down. That needs thinking about, Wordsworth. Yes, by jingo, that does need thinking about. Still—Boulte. No, damn it, the man's a gentleman. He's a member of my own Order, the Distinguished Service. But these other suspects of yours. These two chaps you call Z. It says one's a messenger and the other's in the ranks. It says there's a woman mixed up in it. Now there I think you really might have something. Let's hear all about them. To begin with, what are their two names?"

"They're both called Dowdy, sir."

"Ah yes. Of course. I'd forgotten. Father and son, aren't they? Well, fire ahead, Wordsworth. Tell me about this woman. *Cherchez la femme*—what. I gather that she's no better than she ought to be; and that Ashdown was trying to get off with her. Pretty cute of you to find that out. How did you manage it?"

Wordsworth, seated with his back to the door, heard someone open it. Dorland waved the someone away; the door closed, and Wordsworth talked again.

When he had finished, Dorland's eyes were on stalks.

"Sounds pretty conclusive to me," he said. "If the fellow opened the window once, he could have done it twice. And why did he lie about it? In my opinion, that damns him.

"Damns him," repeated Dorland; and, picking up the telephone, demanded a number which Wordsworth's memory told him was Quaritch's. "Is that you, Tremlett?" he was asking half a minute later. "Is the air commodore free? He is. Good. I'll come along at once"; and, turning to Wordsworth, he said, "You wait here. You may be wanted." Then he rose, revealing a body rather too small for its head, and went off at the double. Alone, Wordsworth lit a cigarette.

It was like Daddy—he thought—to jump to his conclu-

sions. And the fact that none of his conclusions had been based on logic was also typical. A decent old boy, though. One musn't let him make a bloomer if one could help it. And one musn't let Quaritch make a bloomer either. Yet did one owe them that much loyalty? If they meant to take this job out of one's hands—and it certainly looked as if Daddy were heading that way—why not let 'em? Yet if one did, it might cost another life.

That last thought, primarily subconscious and almost entirely beyond logic, seemed to hypnotise Wordsworth. His right hand, just about to replace the cigarette, stayed rigid within an inch of his lips. His left hand clutched up at and held to the second button of his jacket. Unconscious of both these movements, he only knew that his eyes had focused on the window behind Dorland's desk, and that he was staring beyond that window into gray space.

The momentary hypnosis passed almost before he grew aware of it. He was smoking again. He was thinking again; thinking consciously, clearly, logically, about that alternative solution which he had so often discarded as too melodramatic.

"Possible," he thought. "Just possible. If one can trust one's own eyes and Prisworthy."

So thinking, he heard the door open, and Tremlett grunting, "Quaritch wants you in his room, Wordsworth. Come along."

3

Dorland, both hands in his pockets, stood behind Steve Quaritch who, seated at his desk, was telephoning when Wordsworth entered. The person at the other end of the line seemed rather verbose. Quaritch kept saying, "Yes, sir," "I certainly think so, sir." Finally he said, "Very good, sir. He shall come up to your room in ten minutes"; and dropped the instrument back on its cradle.

"What did he have to say?" asked Daddy Dorland.

"A damn sight too much." Steve Quaritch, more like John

Bull than ever, puffed out his big bewhiskered cheeks. "He says he ought to have been told before, and that this is a civilian ministry. He wants to know why the report isn't clearer, and why I didn't suggest calling in Scotland Yard immediately."

"Is he going to call in Scotland Yard?"

"He says that depends on how far we can clarify our report."

"I think I can do that all right. It's pretty obvious these Dowdys did it."

"Well, it's your hunt now, Dorland."

They talked on; until Quaritch, apparently noticing Wordsworth for the first time, said, "So you've turned up, have you?" and, tapping Conington's report, a copy of which lay on his desk, "I see you took my advice. No names. No pack drill." His eyes, however—or so it seemed to Wordsworth—held little bonhomie as he continued:

"But the matter's out of my hands now. The High-Ups are going to decide what's to be done themselves. I should be going along if I were you, Dorland. Let me know what happens."

"All right. You come with me, young man, just in case I want you to explain anything."

That "young man" was still irritating Wordsworth as he followed Dorland out of the overlarge room, and through Tremlett's office into the corridor.

"Who are we going to see, sir?" he asked.

"Scrope-Tarleton. And let me do the talking, please."

Still more irritated—how could Dorland do the talking, what the hell did he know about the thing anyway?—Wordsworth followed on down the staircase till they reached the first floor.

A messenger emerged from his glass lobby and conducted them through an ornate door into the presence of a pallid bespectacled person in his late twenties, who wore an Oxford blue suit and spoke with a super-Oxford accent, fingering his college tie the while.

"You'll have to wait for a little, I fear, Group Captain Dorland," said this person. "The chief is taking a trunk call at the moment. Miss Ethelred, please find the group captain a chair."

Miss Ethelred, who also wore spectacles, brought a chair from between the windows, which were already curtained. The pallid person reseated himself at his desk; and, having said, "Please excuse me, we're fantastically busy this afternoon," began dictating letters to another girl. Wordsworth noticed that he dictated very slowly, prefacing constant corrections with such phrases as, "I don't think that'll quite do, Miss Pomfret. Let's try it this way."

At last, a bell buzzed; and the young Oxonian rose up again, remarking, "The chief will see you now, Group Captain Dorland. Please come this way." It struck Wordsworth as curious that he should knock on Scrope-Tarleton's door.

A slow, carefully modulated voice, called, "Come." The open door disclosed a lanky man, bald head fringed with short gray hair, standing with his back to the fireplace. The man's eyes appeared a trifle too small for his face, which was almost colourless, with thin ascetic lips. He wore a short black coat, striped trousers, and a semi-Gladstonian stiff collar.

Scrope-Tarleton said, "Good afternoon, Dorland," and held out a dry hand. Dorland said, "Good afternoon, sir. I've taken the liberty of bringing Squadron Leader Wordsworth with me, just in case we need him. He's the author of the report which I passed on to Air Commodore Quaritch."

"Not a very elucidative report, as I have just been telling the air commodore."

"I fancy I can elucidate it for you, sir."

"I hope so, Dorland. I sincerely hope so. Won't you both sit down?"

A note of sarcasm in Scrope-Tarleton's voice had irritated Wordsworth still further. Dorland—it seemed to him as the three of them seated themselves—looked a little deflated.

"First of all about these—er—suspects," began Dorland. "As I have already told Wordsworth, I fancy we shall be quite safe in eliminating X and Y. Both of them are known to me personally. Both are, by birth and education, gentlemen."

"And gentlemen do not break the fifth commandment," interrupted Scrope-Tarleton. "Very satisfactory. Very satisfactory indeed, Dorland. Only—can we trust entirely to the *argumentum ad hominem*?"

He broke off there; and, watching him, Wordsworth thought, "He may not know that Y's Boulte, but he must know—unless he's a halfwit, which he obviously isn't—that X is George Ramsay. There can't be many people in this Ministry who are going to America almost at once."

Scrope-Tarleton's next words, spoken almost without sarcasm, seemed to confirm this.

"However," he said, "let us accept the *argumentum ad hominem*, and dismiss X and Y from our considerations. I gather that, in your judgment, the two Zs are the guilty parties. Your judgment, presumably, is based on certain facts which are not disclosed in this somewhat cryptic document. I shall be glad to hear those facts. Please resume, Dorland."

And from the moment Daddy Dorland resumed, "Certainly, sir. The evidence against the two Zs, a father and son named Dowdy, though largely circumstantial, is, in my opinion, both logical and conclusive," it appeared to William Wordsworth that one had left the world of fact for a realm of travesty, whose only gods were Wishful Thinking and the Old School Tie.

For the case against the Dowdys, as presented by Daddy Dorland, who muddled one half of his facts and forgot the other, would have been dismissed without calling on the defence by the most bone-headed magistrate who ever loaded a county bench with his ponderous backside. Yet so entirely did it appear to convince Scrope-Tarleton that he punctuated the whole narrative with "Good point," or "Quite so," or "Exactly, Dorland. The main trouble with the lower orders

is that they have no control over their sexual passions"; and, after Daddy's final, "Those being the facts, sir, I feel we should put the law in motion," he nodded his bald head three times, and said:

"The *prima facie* case seems proved, Dorland. Let me have it in black and white by tomorrow morning. Meanwhile I have one suggestion to make—that you personally question this fellow Albert Dowdy, who might easily break down and make a clean breast of the matter if he were tackled with sufficient forthrightness, and thus strengthen our hand with the police.

"Forthrightness," repeated Scrope-Tarleton. "That—and the personal touch. I have made a point of both throughout my administrative career."

To which he added, "I was sorry to hear from Air Commodore Quaritch that you have been on sick leave till this morning. Otherwise, I feel certain, a matter of such importance would not have been entrusted to one of your subordinates"; and so dismissed them—Daddy Dorland re-inflated, Wordsworth seething with resentment—from that high, velvet-curtained, walnut-panelled office into the corridor outside.

"You cut along and get hold of Dowdy," said Dorland then. "Bring him up to my room at once. I'll soon knock the truth out of him."

Growing hotter and hotter with a fire of fury which blinded even his sense of humour, William Wordsworth set off down the staircase to obey his superior officer's command.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I

"OFF his onion," thought Wordsworth, still descending the staircase. "What does that old nincompoop imagine he'll get out of Albert Dowdy? And as for Scrope-Tarleton, he isn't fit to take his wife and kids, that's to say if he's got a wife and kids, in which case I'm sorry for 'em, to Brighton. Damn it, what do either of 'em know about police work? Muck all. And they keep me sitting there like a blasted dummy. They don't even ask me my opinion. They take the whole thing out of my hands without a by-your-leave. All right. Let 'em. I'm sugared if I care. I'm fed up with this whole bloody Ministry."

"Good evening, squadron leader," said a girl's voice.

He recognised the voice; realised that he had already reached the ground floor and was nearing Dowdy's lobby; pulled himself together, and returned Miss King's greeting.

Noticing her hat and coat, he went on, "You're just off, I see."

"Yes, squadron leader. I'm trying to get home before the blackout."

"Well, you've plenty of time."

Miss King turned, and walked away round an angle of the corridor. Automatically he observed the way she walked. Through the glass of the lobby he saw Pink, busy filling vari-coloured cups from an enormous brown pot.

"Dowdy, sir?" said Pink, who looked pinker than ever. "He's just taking the tea round. This is the last lot. Would you care for some?"

It seemed just the moment for a cup of tea—even without

sugar. Wordsworth entered the lobby; and, drinking the hot liquid, felt his fury begin to cool, and his sense of humour returning. Seen objectively, there was something infinitely comic about Daddy Dorland and Scrope-Tarleton. Both amateurs, they were so profoundly confident they could do the job better than a professional like oneself. Or did that only apply to Dorland? Had Scrope-Tarleton some ulterior motive? There were other pointers in Guy's report which made it clear that X could only be George Ramsay. And if George Ramsay were arrested for the murder of Marcus Ashdown, not even wartime censorship could keep the news out of the Press.

"Nice stink that would kick up for the Air Ministry," he thought; and there was still enough resentment in him to welcome the idea.

Dowdy appeared with a tray and carried off the rest of the teacups, while Wordsworth was still wondering whether a really good stink at the Ministry would cost Dorland and Quaritch their jobs.

"But they'd only get better ones," decided the last of his resentment, "because if a chap makes a real bloomer in this country, he's always promoted." And just as he reached this decision Dowdy returned, grumbling, "Where's my tea, Pinky?"

"The squadron leader had it. I'm just filling up the pot for you and me," said Pink.

He poured the rest of the boiling water from the kettle on the gas ring into the brown teapot; and produced two more cups from his cupboard. Wordsworth, who had lit a cigarette, waited while they sipped. Dowdy—he realised—was watching him curiously. "And what might you be after?" those watery hazel eyes seemed to be asking. A queer-tempered chap. He might—might easily—have had a hand in Ashdown's murder. But that he'd make a clean breast of it to Daddy was about as likely as finding primroses in Cape Remittance.

"When you've finished your tea, Dowdy," said Wordsworth, "I want you to come upstairs with me and see Group Captain Dorland."

"Group Captain Dorland," growled Albert Dowdy. "Who's he?"

2

The lift decanted Wordsworth and Dowdy, who had not spoken since that "Who's he?" close to Dorland's room. Wordsworth looked in, and was waved away. After five minutes the man he had seen sitting with Dorland came out. He opened the door again, and closed it behind him.

"I have Dowdy outside, sir."

"Good. Bring him in."

"Am I to stay, sir?"

"No. Yes. On the whole you'd better. I shall have to have someone to make notes of what he says. Can you do shorthand?"

"No, sir."

"Well, longhand'll do, I suppose. Here, take some paper and sit down at that table. Bring him in first, of course."

"Very good, sir." And Wordsworth, thinking, "If this weren't so utterly idiotic, it really might be funny," once again obeyed his superior officer's command.

Dorland's first mistake—at the messenger's entrance he had assumed the company-orderly-room manner of the major of footsloggers—was in saying, "Come here, Dowdy. I want to ask you some very important questions"; his second, in not asking the man to sit down.

Watching them from his table, Wordsworth was fully aware of the advantage this second mistake conferred on Dowdy, whose eyes already held something of contempt as he asked, "Questions, sir. What about?"

"You'll hear," said Daddy Dorland. "And don't lie to me, because you've told quite enough lies already. What you've got to do, my man, is to make a clean breast of things if you don't want to find yourself under arrest."

"Arrest, sir? Me, sir?"

Dowdy's technique was as old as company-orderly-rooms. His whole attitude indicated perplexity. Nevertheless it seemed to Wordsworth that he was just a little afraid.

"Yes. You," barked Dorland, warming to his work. "Why did you lie to Squadron Leader Wordsworth?"

"I never did, sir."

"Oh, didn't you? What did you tell Squadron Leader Wordsworth when he asked you if anyone could have got into Room Twenty Eight by the window? You told him you couldn't say."

"Did I, sir?"

"Don't bandy words with me, Dowdy. You know damn well you did. Yet you'd actually got into the room by the window yourself. Flying Officer Messiter saw you. So that's that."

Dowdy's thin lips began to work. One of his big hands clenched. But to Wordsworth's surprise he kept silence.

"And now for another lie you told the squadron leader," went on Dorland. "You pretended to him that you knew nothing about your son's wife and Air Vice-Marshal Ash-down. That sort of talk doesn't deceive a man of my experience, Dowdy. You must have known."

"And what if I did?"

Dorland's eyes, glancing across at Wordsworth, bespoke triumph. "You see," they seemed to be saying, "how easily I've trapped him into making that admission. You could have done it yourself if you were only as clever as I am." But Dowdy's eyes, too, were on Wordsworth—and in them he could read only surprise.

"Then you admit you did know?" persisted Dorland. "And your son knew all about it, too. Is that right? Or isn't it?"

"I can't answer for my son," said Dowdy—stubbornly,

after a perceptible pause. "You'd better ask him that yourself, sir."

"The police will do that. The police will have a lot of questions to ask before they're through with this business."

"The police, sir?"

"Yes. Don't try to play the innocent with me, Dowdy. Don't try to pretend you don't know that Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown was murdered."

"Murdered? Who by?"

This time, not alone Dowdy's look but his voice, his whole demeanour, betrayed a surprise which struck Wordsworth as entirely genuine. Bending to his paper, scribbling down question and answer, he thought, "Can't the old nincompoop see that, too? Can't he see he's not getting anywhere? Won't he stop this fool interrogation?"

But already Daddy Dorland was going on:

"That's what the police are going to find out, my man. And when they do, there'll be a rope round somebody's neck. Unless that somebody turns king's evidence. Do you know what that means? In case you don't, I'll tell you. If two men conspire to commit a murder and one of them helps the police by making a clean breast of it, he's said to turn king's evidence—and if he does that, he may escape hanging. Mind you, I only say 'he may.' I'm not making any promises. But if you do decide to make a clean breast of things, I'll do my best for you. Think that over, Dowdy. Think it over very carefully."

And there Daddy Dorland did stop, for five, for ten, for fifteen, for twenty seconds, during which Albert Dowdy's big body stiffened slowly to attention; and his big thumbs sought the seams of his trousers; and his head, bald except for the fringe of almost white hair, lifted; and his chin came up.

"I've nothing to think over," he said, speaking with a curious dignity. "I've got nothing to come clean about. I didn't murder the dirty tyke, though there's many a time I've wanted to wring his neck. And as for my son, Ned, he's no

more a murderer than I am. He's with the guns, is Ned. He's been overseas. He doesn't sit on his tail in an office like that whippersnapper Messiter."

"If you can't keep a civil tongue in your head when speaking about your superiors—" began Dorland.

"You'll put me under arrest, I suppose," growled Dowdy, still at attention, but the tight rope of his selfcontrol obviously fraying. "Well, all I can say is, you just try it on and see what happens. You haven't got any power to put me under arrest. You can't even give me an order. I'm not in the Air Force any more. I'm a government servant. And I know my rights even if you don't.

"Even if you don't," repeated Dowdy; and, turning sharply, marched for the door.

3

For a moment it seemed to Wordsworth, still seated at his table, as though Dorland were going to call Dowdy back. But, though his mouth half opened to give the order, he let the man go.

The door slammed. Shaking with suppressed rage, Dorland asked, "Well, what did you make of that?"; but before Wordsworth could frame a careful answer, another messenger came in and drew down the blackout blinds.

That time the door closed quietly. "I know what I make of it," said Dorland. "Did you take down his answers?"

"Yes, sir. And your questions."

"Good. Read 'em out."

The old man's rage seemed to be passing. He made Wordsworth read the questions and answers twice.

"I'll show this to Quaritch," he said then. "You go back to your own room and wait for me there. You'll have to work late tonight. You remember what Scrope-Tarleton told us. He wants the whole thing in black and white by tomorrow morning."

They left Dorland's room together. In his own room Wordsworth found Guy Conington and Izod.

"Tony's been taken worse. I'm just going along to see him," said Izod; and left them alone.

"You've been a nice time, W.W.," began Conington. "What's been going on?"

"Bedlam. Daddy's made up his apology for a mind that the Dowdys are guilty, and has been trying to prove it by bullying Albert Dowdy. He's with Quaritch now. We saw Quaritch first. He sent us to see the great Scrope-Tarleton. I'm supposed to be writing him a paper."

"I told you the civil service would be in at the finish."

"They're all in it, sugar them. And a nice bloodstained hash they'll make of the job before they're through. None of 'em would let me get in a word edgeways. Not that I tried to. Because it wouldn't have been the slightest use. Nothing's the slightest use. Quaritch ought to have called in Scotland Yard days ago. So they needn't blame me if there's another murder."

"Another murder, W.W.?"

But while Wordsworth, whose temper had driven him to say more than he intended, was still wondering whether to tell Guy about a certain flash of inspiration which had come to him while he sat at the table in Dorland's office, Daddy Dorland himself entered: and both of them rose.

"Won't you sit down, sir?" asked Wordsworth.

"There's no need for that. I've only come to give you your instructions—and they're quite simple. Quaritch agrees with me that the Dowdys must be guilty. What we want is a concise report of the evidence against them."

"But in my opinion, sir——"

"I am not aware, Wordsworth, that I have asked for your opinion. All you have to do is to prepare the report. Kindly see that it is on my desk by nine o'clock tomorrow morning."

For a few moments it seemed to Conington that Wordsworth was about to refuse. The set of his lips, the glint in his eyes, his whole face betrayed the temper which he had already vented. But all he said was, "Very good, sir"; and Dorland, after handing over a bunch of papers with the re-

mark, "You'll need all these," bade them good night.

Expecting another outburst, Conington sat down, ran a hand over his straw-blond hair, and took out his cigarette case. Wordsworth, however, let him light up without another word. Then he began to laugh, and something about the laughter reminded Conington of Boulte.

"What's the joke, W.W.?" he asked.

"My dear Guy, the whole thing's a joke. Do you remember something you once said about the way we're fighting this war? You called it, 'Gentlemen versus Players.' In other words Amateurs versus Professionals. Daddy Dorland, Steve Quaritch and Scrope-Tarleton are the supreme examples of amateurishness. They think they're the Gestapo, God bless 'em. Well, we'll see what the professionals of Scotland Yard have to say about it. All I've got to do is to obey orders and break owners. Only—I'm going to take damn good care not to break myself."

"You mean, in case there is another murder?"

"Never you mind what I mean, Guy."

"But you said, just before Daddy came in——"

"And never you mind what I said either. Just give me my dossier out of that cupboard and buzz off. See you tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow? But I'm not supposed to be on duty tomorrow."

"By jingo, I'd forgotten that. Does it matter? Have you anything important on?"

"No. Only a lunch date."

"Well, keep your lunch date. Only I'd rather you didn't take the whole day."

"For any particular reason?"

"No. Not for any particular reason. Just a hunch of mine."

"You're being very mysterious."

"Am I? Sorry. But turn up, there's a good chap, Guy."

"All right, W.W. Here's your dossier."

"Thanks. Now you'd better get your cloak and bonnet on before the alert goes."

But that Thursday evening the sirens did not sound till nearly nine o'clock; and by that time William Wordsworth, who had snatched half an hour for a snack dinner in the Dive Bar, was so absorbed in his job that he hardly noticed them. And midnight found him still at his desk, making a fair copy of that paper whose first paragraph began, "Reference report already submitted and in accordance with instructions received from Group Captain Dorland after his today's interview with Air Commodore Quaritch and Mr. A. Scrope-Tarleton, during which I was present, I append a fuller elucidation of the report in question insofar as it concerns Z1 and Z2, otherwise Albert Dowdy, messenger in this Ministry, and his son, Edward Dowdy, lance sergeant of anti-aircraft artillery."

4

The single note of the all clear tore the night just as Wordsworth fair-copied the last word of his last paragraph. Pensive, he signed the thing; and, smiling to himself, read it through.

"Taking a leaf out of Negresco's book," he thought. "On the one hand, the Dowdys may have murdered Ashdown. On the other hand, they may not have murdered Ashdown. Now it's up to Dorland, Quaritch, Scrope-Tarleton and company to come down one side of the fence or the other. I'm covered either way."

But on that, his mood changed.

"They'll pass this on to Scotland Yard," his thoughts continued. "Passing things on is all they're any good at. Only—how will that help unless I can get in touch with the Special Branch myself? And they won't let me do that. Blast 'em, they won't let me do anything except be a good little boy who says, 'Yes, sir. Very good, sir.'"

Yet if he went on being a good little boy very much longer, there might be—almost certainly there would be—another murder. That much, at least, his inspiration had made clear.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

I

IT WAS long past one o'clock of a filthy night before Wordsworth, having sealed his paper inside two envelopes and delivered it to the registry, drove out of Downing Street—for the King Charles Street entrance to the Foreign Office courtyard always closed at sunset—into Whitehall. Every instinct urged him to drive straight across that wide thoroughfare, to turn right and then left again into Scotland Yard. There, he would find professionals. And this job needed a professional.

But would Scotland Yard listen to him? What evidence could he produce? His recollection of a phrase in a letter written by a drunken suicide. Prisworthy's paper on time bombs. An identification so vague that he couldn't swear to it at a parade, even if they could arrange such a parade. No. One couldn't go to the Yard with hunches. And from what one knew of Daddy Dorland, one would probably lose one's own job at the Air Ministry if one did.

He wrenched Minnie Mouse's wheel to the left, skidding her and only just avoiding the excavation by the Treasury. "What the hell can I do?" he asked himself; and was still asking himself that question—Gale completely forgotten—when he went to bed; when he woke to find it was not yet four o'clock; and when he started up again, wondering why he should be so unusually restless, to realise that this time it was the telephone which had awakened him.

"Usual wrong number," he thought stupidly. But the bell shrilled and shrilled and shrilled; until, at last, he clicked on the light, and thrust his feet into his slippers, and pulled on a

dressing gown, and ran across the passage into the sitting room.

"Wordsworth?" said the voice at the other end of the line. "Thank God. I've been having you specially rung for hours. Listen. Tony's damned ill. He's got double pneumonia, and I'm not at all sure he's going to get over it. He keeps on asking for you. He says there's something very important he must tell you. Could you possibly come along?"

"What—now?"

"Yes. I've my car here. I could be with you in about twenty minutes—say half an hour at the outside."

"All right. Do you know the address?"

"Yes. The duty officer gave it to me when he gave me your telephone number." And Izod clicked off.

2

The hands of the pigskin clock pointed to twenty minutes to five as Wordsworth sluiced his face in the washbasin. Taking things easily he was ready within a quarter of an hour. Was Boulte going to retract his confession? Sugar Boulte. He'd been a pest from the start of this business.

This business was becoming tolerably plain now. Only—how the hell could one prove it to three self-opinionated bastards like Dorland, Quaritch and Scrope-Tarleton? Damn 'em, they wouldn't even let one open one's mouth.

Calming himself, he lit a cigarette and went downstairs to wait for Izod. It was raining, and bitterly cold. His man kept him waiting another ten minutes. "Sorry," said Izod, as he opened the door of his Rolls-Bentley. "I came as fast as I could. It's like ink tonight."

"How's Boulte?"

"I doubt if he'll pull through, but his mother and the nurse seem quite hopeful."

They drove off at ten miles an hour, and nearly crashed into an army motorcyclist at the first corner.

"Have you any idea what he wants me for?" asked Wordsworth.

"No. But I can guess. Don't talk to me, there's a good chap. It's all I can do to see where I'm going."

They circled north. Presently Wordsworth closed his eyes. When he reopened them they were climbing a steepish hill. Through the semicircle made by the screenwiper he saw red lights on the road, and what he guessed to be a church tower. They turned left at the lights, then right, then left again. Once more Wordsworth drowsed—to wake as Izod put on his brakes and said, "Well. Here we are."

Rain soaked them as they groped their way through an iron gate, along a gravel path, and up steep steps to a glass-sided portico. Immediately a door opened, and a woman said, "I heard you drive up. Tony's a shade better. Is this Squadron Leader Wordsworth?"

"Yes. Wordsworth, this is Mrs. Patterson, Tony's mother."

"How do you do?"

Shaking hands with the woman in a gloomy hall hung with immense pictures in tarnished frames, Wordsworth realised how beautiful she must have been in her youth. But there was more than beauty in the lined face under the tidy white hair—strength of purpose, and a cool sanity, and a saving grace of humour which revealed itself in her next words.

"Tony's difficult enough when he's well," she went on. "When he's ill he's absolutely impossible. That's why we had to drag you out of bed. You must have a cup of tea—I've just made some—before you go up to him."

She led into a drawing room, hung with pictures even larger than those in the hall and so cluttered with chairs, sofas, tables and cabinets that it might have been a furniture dealer's shop. In the early Victorian grate under the mid-Victorian mantelpiece coals burned. On one of the tables stood a late Victorian silver teaset.

"Do you take sugar?" asked Mrs. Patterson, filling one of the colossal cups. "Would you care for a digestive biscuit?"

"I think I'll go up and see how Tony is," said Izod.

"Don't fuss so. Have your tea first."

The lights in this room were brighter. They showed Wordsworth a certain resemblance between Tony Boulte's mother and her eldest son, who had been born—he remembered suddenly—out of wedlock. "Like Michael," he thought; and, just for a few seconds, his thoughts switched to Gale. In her youth, Mrs. Patterson must have had much the same experience as Gale. How little it seemed to have affected her.

"You men," she was going on, "always let illness fuss you. And you don't stand up to trouble as well as we do. I lost a husband in the last war, Squadron Leader Wordsworth. And I've already lost one of my sons in this. Did you know my Derek by any chance? He was a grand boy. And he meant a lot to me. But I don't grudge him, any more than I grudged my husband. I read once, only I can never remember where, that nothing's worth living for unless it's worth dying for. That's mainly a man's point of view. Mine, as a woman, is that nothing's worth living for unless it's worth giving for. I hope you don't think that's too sentimental. Tony does. But then Tony's always been a bit queer, ever since he was a toddler. Would you like to go up to him now, Frank?"

"Please."

Izod went out. Mrs. Patterson's blue eyes followed him. "It's lucky my David has a Jonathan," she said. "He took Derek's death very badly. Much worse than I did. He has no philosophy, you see. It's my fault in a way. I hadn't any philosophy when he was growing up."

She broke off, and one of her fine lined hands went to a silver cigarette box. Wordsworth proffered his lighter. As he did so, Izod returned to say:

"He knows you're here and he'd like you to come up, Wordsworth."

They left Mrs. Patterson smoking as though she really enjoyed it. Steep stairs, also hung with pictures, led up to a wide landing with many doors, outside one of which stood a gaunt gray-haired woman in nurse's uniform, who whis-

pered, "Don't be longer than you can help. I oughtn't to let you in, but he's fussing so. And it's always bad for them to fuss."

"Fuss," thought Wordsworth, "seems to be the favourite word."

3

Another coal fire in another early Victorian grate made the room in which Boulte lay intolerably hot. The only illumination came from this fire and a nightlight by the bed.

"Have you brought him, Frank?" croaked a voice which Wordsworth hardly recognised.

"Yes."

"Then run away and leave us, there's a good chap."

"All right. Only, he mustn't stay long. Not more than five minutes."

The German curse from behind the nightlight was recognisably Boulte's. Izod went out, leaving the door ajar.

"Close that ruddy door and come here," croaked Boulte.

Wordsworth obeyed, and picked his way through too much furniture; past the armchair by the fire in which the nurse must have been sitting, to the bedside. The nightlight showed Boulte propped on three pillows. Bedclothes concealed everything except the neck of his thick flannel pyjamas, his unshaved face and his untidy hair. His pale eyes had not quite lost their jungle look; but otherwise he seemed curiously pathetic.

"Frank thinks I'm for it," he began. "I thought so, too, when I made him send for you. But I'm not. Sorry."

"That's all right, old chap."

"And I'm sorry about the other night, too. It was funny all that evidence getting burned up. And after all the trouble I took too."

He stopped, breathing heavily.

"It fooled Frank properly," he went on. "I've been pretty lousy to Frank. But it's been his own fault in a way. He

started by thinking I'd done it. That's why he tried to pocket that fuze. And do you know why he thought I'd done it?"

It was clear, from the pause which followed, that Boulte expected an answer.

"No," said Wordsworth, "I haven't the slightest idea. Of course, he knew that you hated Ashdown."

"He had a better reason than that." Boulte attempted a grin. "You see, I spotted the locker one day when I was having a pow-wow with Ramsay; and when I heard Bottom Upwards had taken over Room Twenty Eight, I told Frank I'd a good mind to plant a small time bomb in it. That made him suspicious. And when I saw you were a bit suspicious too . . ."

He broke off again, breathing so heavily that Wordsworth wondered whether he ought to fetch the nurse. But once more habit proved too strong; and he found himself prompting:

"When you saw that I was suspicious, too, you thought there might be a chance of getting yourself put on trial for murdering Ashdown?"

"Yes."

"Just so that you could tell the court about those flak maps. Don't you think that was rather crazy?"

"Perhaps it was. But I damn nearly brought it off." The pale blue eyes no longer resembled a jungle animal's. They, too, seemed pathetic, almost like a child's. "If that evidence hadn't been burned up— Some people would call it an Act of God, I suppose. You were just as much fooled as Frank. Or weren't you?"

Again it seemed clear that Boulte expected an answer. But already the door handle had turned; and, glancing over his shoulder, Wordsworth saw the nurse.

"I might just have been fooled," he said slowly, "if Prishworthy hadn't happened to send me a copy of the same paper you'd pinned on the table. But you made one bad mistake—all that clockwork. It ought to have been tubes and acid."

"I know it ought." Once more Boulte attempted a grin.

"But there wasn't any time. I only thought of faking the thing up about half an hour before we had dinner when I found I'd kept that paper of Prисworthy's in my pocket. The shell was a souvenir of the last war, by the way. You ought to have spotted that. Wordsworth——"

The nurse was close. She had made to lay a hand on Wordsworth's arm.

"Don't go," croaked Boulte. "I haven't done yet. Don't let him go, nurse. Please. It's important. It really is most important."

His pale eyes seemed frantic with anxiety. The nurse stood hesitant.

"Promise me you won't be too long," she said; and, turning, went towards the door.

The pale eyes watched her. The lips under the bristling moustache whispered, "Come close. She mustn't hear this. Nobody but you must hear this."

And as Wordsworth bent his head to listen, Boulte went on whispering, until at the last he said, almost in his natural voice:

"I'm right. I know I'm right. I've got a hunch. It came to me all in a flash. That's why I had to see you. That's why I feel such a swine for having tried to lead you up the garden. Promise me you'll follow my hunch. Promise me that before you go, Wordsworth. It's right. It must be right. Only I don't know who, I can't imagine who——"

Excitement stifled him. He began to gasp. The bedclothes heaved to his gasping.

"Nurse!" called Wordsworth, straightening himself; but as she moved towards them he bent his head again, saying quickly:

"Don't worry, old chap. My hunch is much the same as yours."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

I

JUST outside the door of Boulte's room, Wordsworth encountered Izod.

"He sounds worse," said Izod. "It's terrible to hear him gasp like that. Do you think we ought to telephone the doctor?"

"The nurse doesn't think so. I asked her. She says it's only because he got too excited."

They stood listening. Gradually, the sounds within grew more normal.

"If you think it's all right," said Izod, "we may as well go down."

He closed the door, which Wordsworth had left ajar. They made their way downstairs, and into the drawing room.

"Well," asked Tony's mother, still in her high-backed chair, "how is he? Not much better, I suppose. We can't expect that till the temperature goes down. You'll both stay for breakfast, I hope. My maids are always up by half past six, and it's ten past already."

Wordsworth attempted to excuse himself. "Nonsense," said Tony's mother. "How are you going to get home unless Frank drives you? And he won't leave the house yet awhile. He's much too worried."

"I'm not as worried as all that, Mrs. Patterson."

"My dear man, if you could only see yourself."

She was right, decided Wordsworth. Izod—that tough egg, Izod—looked worried to death. All that smooth actorishness had gone. His face might have been an old man's.

"I'm not as worried as all that," he repeated. "But I'd like

to stay on for a bit, just to see if he improves. So if you don't mind, Wordsworth——"

"Of course I don't. But please don't bother about breakfast, Mrs. Patterson. I'll have some when we get back to town."

"Nonsense," repeated Mrs. Patterson. "I'll just go and see what there is in the larder."

She rose and went out, Izod opening the door for her.

"What did Tony have to tell you?" he asked Wordsworth.

"He wanted to retract that fake confession of his."

"It was a fake then, just one of his leg-pulls?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's one comfort anyway." And Izod, visibly a little brighter, took out his cigarette case, only to find it empty.

"Have one of mine," said Wordsworth.

"Thanks."

Izod sank into one of the multitudinous chairs, and fell silent. Wordsworth couldn't help feeling a little sorry for him, and just a little envious of Boulte. Rather wonderful—especially if you were a man like Tony Boulte—to have a friend like Frank Izod. And Mrs. Patterson was rather wonderful, too.

She came back while he was still thinking of her: there were eggs and a little bacon, plenty of marmalade, but hardly any butter—or rather margarine. She'd been upstairs as well as down. Tony was definitely over the worst. He'd begun to perspire. She really needn't have stayed up all night. No doubt they'd like to wash before breakfast.

Just as they were sitting down at a mahogany table for twelve, under a copper electrolier whose light petered out among a collection of vast seascapes which almost covered the embossed wallpaper, a surprise alert sounded, guns fired, and an explosion rattled the windows.

"What a nuisance these Nazis are," said Mrs. Patterson; and, turning to the woman, almost as old as herself, who had just brought in the Sheffield plate dishes, "If you can't stop

shaking every time a bomb drops, Mary, I shall have to send you into the country. And you know how you'd hate that."

2

It was still dark and bitterly cold, but with no rain falling, when Wordsworth and Izod came out into the portico and down the steps.

"So in your opinion Tony's definitely out of it?" suggested Izod as they drove away.

"I don't mind admitting that much."

"But you're not going to admit any more?"

"No."

"Well, I know what I think."

"You've told me that already. Let's give the thing a rest, shall we?"

"All right."

They talked about Mrs. Patterson for a while. It seemed to be growing just a little lighter.

"This brings us into Ladbroke Grove," said Izod. "You'll be back in no time now. We shan't either of us be up to much work today. Not that it matters in my case. Langfordson isn't even vaguely interested in flak. Neither is anybody else—except the chaps who have to fly through it. I don't know what you think about Air Force Intelligence generally. My own feeling is that it's about up to the standard of the Crimea."

"As far as Security is concerned," laughed Wordsworth, "Cr cy would be more applicable. Whose fault do you think it is?"

"Nobody's in particular, and everybody's in general. It's the same trouble all round. Instead of organising, we rely on happy improvisation. And if there's one thing you can't improvise, it's Intelligence. The Huns must have been spending a thousand pounds to our one before war broke out. They brought that fellow Nicolai back to organise their Intelligence for them."

"I thought Himmler was the chap."

"Himmler's only head of what Churchill calls the Jestapo. Their job's counter-espionage, with a spot of torturing thrown in to keep everyone happy." And Izod talked on, very interestingly, till they arrived at Wordsworth's flat.

He drove off again at once. Upstairs, Wordsworth found the new waiter just laying breakfast; countermanded his standing orders; shaved and ran himself a hot bath. At a quarter to nine he rang up Guy, whose mouth seemed to be full of porridge as he drawled, "Very well. I'll take a taxi. When do you expect to be in?"

"Oh, I shan't be very late. I just want to see about my new pants and get a spot of fresh air into my lungs."

"Right."

The next three quarters of an hour Wordsworth spent with his eyes half closed, collarless, in an armchair. It struck him as strange that he should not be feeling at all sleepy—and as curious that Boulte, who could not possibly know as much as he did, should have conceived much the same idea. Or was that so curious? Boulte must have studied Prissworthy's paper on time bombs pretty carefully; and anyone who did so must realise how it widened the field of inquiry. All the same . . .

"All the same," he decided, his forty-five minutes of meditation over, "my hunch and his are only hunches. Even I don't really know anything. I only suspect."

He rose; finished his dressing; and walked out into the street. The sky was coldest blue with just a hint of sunshine; and the pavement dry underfoot. At one entrance to Shepherd Market, the man on the hand-propelled cycle had just begun to arrange his flowers.

"Might send Gale some flowers," thought Wordsworth. But that seemed a bit too sentimental—and maybe she would misunderstand the attention, imagine he really had made up his mind about the future. Whereas of course he hadn't. Because, at the moment, he needed all his mind for his job.

"Got to do something," continued his thoughts. "Can't go

on messing about like this. I know what I'd do in Cape Remittance." But how could one do that here, in this hide-bound England, where everybody had to ask everybody else's permission before they took the simplest action, with the result that nearly every action was taken too late?

He walked on, up Lansdowne Steps and up Hay Hill, along Dover Street and into Bond Street, slightly battered but still carrying on. His tailor's shop was still shut. Probably they wouldn't open till ten. It didn't really matter about his trousers. They'd been rather a time, but then everything took rather a time these days. He'd better be getting along to the Ministry, just in case Daddy wanted to see him.

"Why, hallo, William," said Gale.

He must have been daydreaming, otherwise he would have seen her before. Pulling himself together, he saluted, and took off his glove to shake hands.

"Just on your way to business?" he asked.

"Yes. My first appointment's at eleven, so I walked from Marylebone. Why aren't you at your office?"

"Mainly because I've been up most of the night."

They chatted for a few moments. His mind slipped a few cogs. Was his job really so important? Wasn't Gale far more important? How fresh she looked. One could never imagine she'd just come off a train.

"My walk's made me feel I'd like a cup of coffee," said Gale. "Why don't you have one?"

"That's not a bad idea. It seems hours since I had breakfast. Where shall we go?"

"Lyons is the nearest—and the cheapest. This way."

They walked up Clifford Street and into the shop. Only two or three of the marble-topped tables were occupied. They sat down and gave their order to the waitress. Gale took a pack of American cigarettes from her handbag. She offered one to Wordsworth.

"That makes two late nights running," she said as he lit up. "Aren't you feeling pretty weary?"

"Curiously enough, I'm not."

"You haven't told me what Major Boulte wanted to see you about."

"Oh, it was nothing very important."

"Okay, Mr. Policeman," laughed Gale. "I won't be inquisitive."

A nice laugh, she had. She was an understanding young woman, too. Why shouldn't he tell her his suspicions, and ask her what she would do if she were in his place? If his suspicions were correct, she needn't worry about her relations with Ashdown having to come out. It would be nice to have one person—just one—to whom he could talk quite openly. If they'd been married, now . . . But they weren't. And anyway, even if he did eventually marry her, he wouldn't tell her that sort of thing. Women gossiped so. A wife who knew too much about her husband's job could be a positive menace.

He remembered a case in point, and another case. Then, abruptly, he remembered Mrs. Reggie. Good God, had Reggie told her . . . the only thing he knew worth telling? Was that what he'd been trying to say in his last letter?

"Why are you so pensive all of a sudden?" asked Gale.

He realised that he must have been daydreaming again, and answered, pulling himself together once more:

"Sorry. I've rather a lot on my mind at the moment. It's nice of you not to be inquisitive. Will you be spending another night in town fairly soon?"

The question had been unpremeditated. It might have been better not to put it. But now one might just as well go on.

"Because if so," he went on, "we could go dancing again."

"Could we?" asked Gale; and her eyes asked so much more than the mere words that he felt himself flush under their direct gaze; felt, once again, that he had been rather a cad to "try it on with her." Because of course he had been trying it on with her when he invited her to his flat. And after that, just for a second, he remembered the woman who was Mrs. Patterson, but had never been Lady Boulte.

"I think we could," he said, speaking very slowly; and it was Gale's turn to feel herself flush, not only because his meaning seemed so obvious, but because, even if he hadn't taken *her* meaning, she would have gone dancing with him again, and maybe she might have gone to his flat again, and maybe, if she had gone to his flat again, she might have forgotten her duty to Michael.

"But now," she knew, "I don't have to worry about that any more. And of course I shan't ever tell him." For a husband who knew too much about his wife could be quite a menace.

Gale Johnson remembered a case in point, and another case, and yet another (men did gossip so), while she said, she too speaking very slowly:

"Of course I should have to ask Eileen about putting me up. She's got such a lot of friends and they all want to use that spare room of hers. But I expect she'll be able to manage it some day next week. Only—*isn't* next week Christmas?"

"My diary seems to agree with that. But what difference does it make?"

"Well, you see, William dear, the Christmas days rather belong to Michael. Still, I'll try to manage something. I'll ring you up as soon as I've had a talk to Eileen. And now I really must go."

"Must you?"

"Yes. I'm afraid I must."

3

Gale, parting from her William (he was almost her William now) at the corner of Bond Street, saw that he was again pensive.

"Something's worrying you," she said.

"I am feeling a bit harassed. But I expect I'll get over it."

He smiled at her; saluted, and turned away. She walked

to Helen Stannard's thinking, "As long as he isn't worried about me—and I'm sure he isn't—it doesn't matter."

Walking into his tailor's, Wordsworth thought, "It's funny, making up one's mind to marry a girl at ten o'clock in the morning over a cup of coffee." Because of course he had made up his mind to marry her, and she knew it. There was no getting over that.

"Can't very well draw back now," he realised. "Don't want to either. Though it's a bit shattering. Wonder how it all happened. Did I fall in love with her at first sight? I suppose so. When am I going to propose to her? The next time we meet? Obviously. Will she accept me? Of course she will. Now how do I know that? Is it just another hunch, or have I any actual evidence? Actual evidence. She wouldn't have called me 'William dear,' especially when she was bringing in Michael, if she didn't really care for me. And she'd never have kissed me the way she did either. She's not that sort. Why did I ever think she was? Perhaps I don't know much about women, except bad ones."

Meanwhile his tailor was saying, "I'm sorry about your trousers, sir. They only came in late yesterday. May I suggest you put them on, and leave the pair you're wearing with us? They could do with a good cleaning."

By the time he had changed his trousers in the fitting room, it was nearly half past ten. He wondered whether to pick up Minnie Mouse at the garage but decided on walking to the Air Ministry. He ought to have been at the Ministry long before this. But, damn it, one couldn't think in that ruddy place. Someone was always coming in, the phone was always going. And he must think his hardest. Now. Before it was too late. Before . . .

"Morning, Wordsworth," said a voice. "So you get your clothes here, too."

By what struck Wordsworth as the most peculiar coincidence, the voice was George Ramsay's. Apparently he had been daydreaming once more; otherwise he would have recognised that tall figure the moment it entered the shop.

"I've been coming here for years," he managed to say.

"Have you, though. They're pretty good, I think. And not too expensive, as tailors go nowadays. I've been buying quite a trousseau. It seems that the Americans expect English visitors to be well dressed, war or no war."

"When are you off, Sir George?"

"Tuesday."

"Have you finished at the Ministry?"

"Pretty well. But there are still one or two jobs I've got to clear up. Come in and see me before I go, Wordsworth. I'd like to know how matters are progressing. Is that coat ready for me, Smithers?"

"Yes, Sir George. The fitter's waiting for you now."

The tailor led Ramsay away. Wordsworth buckled his greatcoat, and walked out into the street thinking. "Tuesday. As soon as that."

Ten minutes took him across Piccadilly, and across Jermyn Street into St. James' Square. Another five minutes, and he was past the Athenæum Club, descending the steps. The clock at the Horse Guards pointed three minutes to eleven as he made his way through the passage that leads to Downing Street. All the time he had been thinking clearly. But as he crossed the Foreign Office courtyard and approached the Air Ministry, thought grew inconsecutive; and, having shown his pass to the R.A.F. corporal, he was only aware of an instinct.

"What you ought to do," said that instinct, "is to take one more look at Room Twenty Eight."

Coming down the few stone stairs that led from ground floor to street level was Moxom. He gave Moxom good morning, and asked him, "How goes it?" They chatted for half a minute. At the top of the stairs, by the filing cabinet which always seemed as though it had been left there by an absent-minded furniture shifter, stood a sentry with a rifle. The sentry stiffened to attention. Wordsworth recognised him for one of the men who had lifted Ashdown's body on to the stretcher. Turning right, and then left, he saw

the messenger lobby—and, approaching the lobby from the other end of the corridor, Daddy Dorland.

Dorland reached the lobby while Wordsworth was still a little distance away from it. Something seemed to attract his attention. He stopped; peered in through the glass; jerked his head up, jerked it round; saw Wordsworth; shouted his name.

Wordsworth, at the run, reached the door of the lobby just as Dorland flung it open.

Inside, they found Albert Dowdy, still seated at the table on which he had made the tea. But Albert Dowdy's bald head had fallen forward on to that table, and his shoulders were writhing, and his huge hands clutched at the arms of the chair, which shook and shook, its legs grating on the stone floor, to every movement of his huge haunches.

"Get a doctor," said Daddy Dorland. "Quick."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

I

"SOME very quick-acting poison," said the middle-aged wing commander with the metal serpents on the lapels of his R.A.F.V.R. uniform. "It's lucky I happened to be here, that emetic I gave him may help. I was on to the hospital just before you arrived. He was unconscious when the ambulance brought him in. But he's still alive. If he comes to, you ought to be able to find out if the stuff was self-administered, and how he got hold of it. Will you be wanting me any more, inspector?"

"Not for the moment, thank you, sir."

"Then I'll be off."

The door of the redecorated Room Twenty Eight closed behind the doctor. Daddy Dorland, seated at the new desk with his feet on the cleaned carpet, said, "Of course it was self-administered. Don't you agree with me, Wordsworth?"

"May I suggest that we get the facts clear first, and deal with your suppositions later, sir," said the man from Scotland Yard.

Secretly, Wordsworth chuckled. Like the doctor, who had insisted that the police must be called in immediately, this Inspector Barker knew his job. And he wasn't the sort of chap to be browbeaten by Woolworth group captains—as Conington called them—either. That chin was too strong; and the mouth under that grizzled moustache too much the old-fashioned regimental sergeant major's; and the brown eyes too quiet, too determined. A good broad forehead Barker had, too. Nobody's yes-man, this.

"Now the facts as I understand them, sir," went on Inspector Barker, who had not yet made use of a notebook, "are that you were approaching the messengers' lobby from one end of the corridor and Squadron Leader—Wordsworth, I think you said—was approaching it from the other. You reached the lobby first. As you did so, you heard a noise. A thump, I think you called it. You looked in, and saw that this man Dowdy's head had fallen forward on to the table. You immediately shouted for the squadron leader's assistance."

"Not for his assistance. I just shouted for him."

"Anyway you both entered the lobby simultaneously; and, the moment you realised that Dowdy had been taken ill, you sent the squadron leader to find a doctor. How long was it before the doctor came?"

"Not more than five minutes at the outside."

"And what did you do in the meantime?"

"I tried to lift Dowdy up, but he was too heavy for me."

"Did he say anything?"

"No, but he seemed to be trying to."

"And that's all you can tell me, sir?"

"That's all I can tell you about what happened this morning. But I can tell you a great deal more about why it happened."

"Ah, the supposition. Very well, sir. If you think it will be helpful."

"Helpful. I should just think it would be. People usually have a reason for committing suicide. And this man Dowdy had a better reason than most."

"And what do you allege that reason to be, sir?"

"Allege," fumed Dorland. "I like that. You just listen to me, inspector. Why, the whole thing's as plain as a pike-staff. I've a good idea where he got the stuff from too. From his son, who's a chemist by profession. They're both murderers." And Daddy, who had obviously interpreted Wordsworth's overnight paper by the light of his own imagination, spoke for ten minutes without a stop.

"Plain as a pikestaff," he repeated finally. "After what I said to him yesterday afternoon, Dowdy knew the game was up, so he just threw his hand in. What you ought to do is to arrest the son immediately. Otherwise we'll have him committing suicide, too."

Inspector Barker, who had at last taken out a notebook, looked up from his writing.

"Can you tell me where to find the son, sir?"

"No. But Wordsworth can. He's done all the donkey work. I've been away. Look here, I've half a hundred things to do. So how would it be if I left you to carry on? You can keep Wordsworth for an hour or so if you feel you need any assistance. He could show you all the papers anyway."

"Thank you, sir. I feel that's a very good idea."

2

Daddy Dorland went out. Wordsworth and Barker looked at each other for a moment. Then Barker said, "Two or three years back we had quite a little correspondence with a Colonel Wordsworth. He wanted some information about fingerprinting apparatus, and microphotography. The assistant commissioner signed the letters; but I supplied most of the information. A relation of yours perhaps?"

"The closest I have, inspector. And your information proved most valuable."

"Thank you, sir."

"Cut the 'sir' out, will you, Barker? I'm not a chief of police in this establishment. All I'm supposed to do is the donkey work. Let's get on with it, shall we?"

"That's what I've been wanting to do for the last three quarters of an hour."

Barker snapped an elastic band round his notebook; and took the key of the lobby—which the doctor had insisted on locking, despite Dorland's protest, "But we can't leave all those envelopes in there, some of 'em are marked Imme-

diated"—from one of his trouser pockets. As they left the room, Wordsworth thought, "This is the first bit of luck I've had."

Outside the door of the lobby stood the uniformed constable who had accompanied Barker. They opened the door; entered, and looked at the table, on which lay an overturned teacup.

"A good many people have tea at eleven," said Wordsworth. "The messengers make it. There's usually another one in this lobby. His name's Pink. But he'd be here if he were on duty today."

Inspector Barker, continuing his inspection, said, "Dowdy seems to have made tea for a lot of people before he drank his own. We may as well go through the usual routine—fingerprints, photographs, inquiries—but somehow I don't feel they'll get us anywhere." And after he had told the constable to telephone for the required assistance, and whispered some other instruction, he bent down to examine the floor.

"Do you think the man was trying to commit suicide?" he asked, straightening his big frame. "You know far more about this business than I do."

"I'm very doubtful."

"So am I."

Barker gave his reasons. Most suicides by poison were committed at home. There was nearly always a bottle or a screw of paper lying about. In nine cases out of ten, one found a letter. Why had Dowdy waited till this morning? "The old gentleman" had talked to him about four o'clock yesterday. The old gentleman seemed a bit prone to rush his fences.

"He's certainly that," agreed Wordsworth; and they smiled at each other, much in the same way that two consultants smile at each other when a husband suggests that he knows how his wife should be treated better than they do. But Wordsworth's smile hid a considerable anxiety. For now, the case really was out of his hands; and Barker,

although the soundest of sound men, did not appear to possess much imagination. Still, one might work on him.

Meanwhile, as the fingerprint expert and the photographer had arrived and were unpacking their gear, he excused himself and rang up Conington from Room Twenty Eight.

"Thought you'd failed to return to your base," drawled Guy Conington. "I was just panicking about my lunch date. No. There's nothing doing up here. You've some news for me, have you? Anything really hot? You'd rather not tell me on the telephone. All right. I'll look in on my way out."

Guy appeared after a few minutes. Barker was back in Room Twenty Eight by then. Before Wordsworth could introduce them, they had shaken hands.

"Inspector Barker and I first met when I was a cub reporter in the police courts," explained Guy. "And we've been meeting off and on ever since."

Told the news, he asked, "Is this the other murder you've been waiting for, W.W.?"

Wordsworth, deliberately evasive, answered, "I may be able to tell you that when you come back from lunch. About how long are you going to be?"

"About how long may I be?"

"Oh, make it as long as you like as far as I'm concerned. After all it is your day off, and I don't look like getting away at all."

"Thanks awfully, W.W."

"Mr. Conington," said Barker when he and Wordsworth were alone again, "always was a rare one for the ladies." So he, too, must have noticed those mixed looks—anxiety, disappointment, relief—which had chased one another across Guy's face in the last few moments. Which implied a certain amount of imagination. But did it imply enough?

Besides, even if one succeeded in convincing Barker that one's hunch had become something more than a hunch since the poisoning of Dowdy, what could he do about it? Even Scotland Yard had its limitations, its forms of procedure.

And once again Wordsworth's smile hid a growing anx-

iety as he said, "I'm afraid I can't offer you anything to eat up here. That's a luxury reserved for brass hats—and senior civil servants. But there's a canteen of sorts on the premises, we can go there if you like."

"There are several things I ought to do first. One of them's to telephone the hospital."

"Can't I do that for you?"

"No. I've a man on duty there. I sent him along the moment the doctor told us it looked as though it might be a suicide case."

But the call to the detective at the hospital only produced the information that Dowdy was still unconscious, and that the doctor in charge thought his nearest relative should be sent for.

"Would that be the son?" asked Barker.

"I don't believe there's a wife. But he'll be able to tell us. Shall I try to get hold of him?"

"Please. If he's anywhere near London, we could send a car."

"I don't imagine that'll be necessary." And Wordsworth, having riffled through his notebook till he found the number, rang up Pullen's headquarters.

Pullen himself answered. "Sergeant Dowdy? But he's only just come back from another twenty-four hours' leave. That's the second time he's been off recently." His father had been taken ill? Dangerously ill. Oh, in that case of course. . . . Where should he report? To the hospital. All right. He could be there in about an hour. Call it an hour and a half. Not quick enough? The father might die. Oh well, in that case, Pullen would send him along in his own car.

"Twenty-four hours' leave," reflected Barker. "Only got back to duty about an hour ago. That seems rather queer. The old gentleman may not be so wrong after all. Let's see how our experts are getting on, and whether my chap's checked the other cups yet."

The fingerprint man and the photographer were just

packing up. The constable, ready to go on guard again, produced his notebook.

"It didn't take very long, sir," he said. "The messenger in the next lobby told me what rooms Dowdy provided tea for. There are fifteen altogether—numbers twenty eight to forty two. But Twenty Eight isn't occupied. I went to all the other rooms and I looked at all the cups. They'd all been drunk from. But there's one funny thing I noticed, sir."

"What was that?"

"All the other cups are white, sir. The one Dowdy drank from is yellow."

"Good man. That may be important."

It struck Wordsworth how rarely one heard that phrase "Good man," so common in the fighting units, at the Air Ministry, where people seemed so much more apt to discourage or criticise a fellow than to praise him.

"I wonder if I am going a bit bolshie," he thought next; and suddenly—because that thought was merely a repetition of words spoken by Gale—his mind conceived a picture of Gale, not as he had seen her little more than a couple of hours ago across a marble-topped table in a teashop, but moving towards a very different table in an alcove of the underground ballroom at the Hotel Trianon. And suddenly, behind and beyond that picture of Gale's auburn head high on her sloping shoulders, there materialised yet another vision, yet two more visions, of his sub-conscious mind.

For all this process was subconscious. Consciously, he could only take in Barker's:

"We'll have another look in that cupboard. Open it for me, will you, Horton?"

Inside the cupboard, on the middle shelf, stood ten clean cups, complete with saucers and spoons. Seven of these cups were plain white, and one had a blue rim. But the remaining two seemed exact facsimiles of the yellow cup last used by Albert Dowdy.

"Doesn't get us very far," grumbled Barker. "We'll have

these dregs analysed of course. That cupboard's a regular little grocer's shop. He sells the stuff, I suppose?"

"Yes. Several of the messengers do."

"Well, I don't mind lunching on biscuits if you don't. And we can use some of his tea, too."

"Don't you think the tea might be a little unhealthy, Barker?"

"I'm willing to risk it if you are, sir."

"Make it Wordsworth, please."

"All right. If you say so, Wordsworth."

Barker smiled again, saying to himself, "He's no snob; and he looks as though he's got something up his sleeve." Aloud he said, "It's quite clear that only one cup was poisoned. But that's about the only thing that is clear. Let's hope Dowdy comes round. We shall be in a bit of a mess if he doesn't. Meanwhile, have you any suppositions?"

"I might have. Later. But I don't want to prejudice you till you've read all the evidence. There's quite a dossier of it. You people really ought to have been called in long ago."

"Then why weren't we?"

"That's rather a long story, but you'll find a good deal of it in the dossier. Especially if you read between the lines. Let's eat, shall we?"

While they were eating biscuits and drinking their tea in Room Twenty Eight, Barker happened to say, "I expect young Conington's doing himself a bit better than this. He's probably eating oysters and drinking champagne."

"We'll ask him when he comes back."

3

But when Guy Conington did come back, towards five o'clock of a very dark afternoon, he found the door of Room Twenty Eight, to which he made his way at once, guarded by a constable. By the constable, stood Pink, fetched from his home in a police car, and now waiting his turn to be examined by a Yard sergeant in plain clothes who spoke

with a strong Scottish accent and had concluded each previous examination with the same sentence, "And those are the only people you actually saw enter the rooms in question and the messengers' lobby, or pass along the corridor, during the time we have been considering?"

"Squadron Leader Wordsworth took the inspector up to his own room," said the constable in answer to Conington's inquiry.

Conington took the lift to the third floor. There was no guard outside the door of the room he shared with Wordsworth. He went in. At his own desk, Barker sat reading. Wordsworth, also seated, signalled, finger at lip, that he must not interrupt the reader's concentration.

"Sleuths on the job," thought Conington. "Great brains at work. Mustn't be asked questions. As though I care a tinker's curse who murdered Marcus Ashdown. Or who murdered Albert Dowdy, either."

He sank on to one of the guest chairs; fumbled for his gold cigarette case, and lit up.

"W.W. may know a lot about sleuthing," continued his thoughts; "but he doesn't know much about the ladies. Sock on the jaw indeed. Lucky I was able to borrow that flat. She didn't even jib when I told her where we were going. Jolly good lunch they sent us up from the restaurant. Not that we either of us ate much. Gosh, what a girl. And I'd imagined she might be a bit frigid. It only shows how little one can tell. Why, I've never known anyone so mad keen for it in my life. I wonder how many lovers she's really had. They always tell you there's only been one. But I'll swear Elsie's straighter than most of them. What a darling she is. What a perfect darling."

Still lost in sensuous reliving of the last hours, from the moment they had met in St. James' Park ("because it wouldn't do for anyone to see us leaving the Ministry together, Guy") to the moment when they had parted, he was startled by the telephone bell.

"It's for you, Barker," said W.W. "Your instrument's on the same line as this one."

Barker, having listened to some report or other, said, "I'm very glad to hear it. No. You'd better not. I'll come along myself. As soon as I'm through here. About another hour. Possibly a bit longer. As there's no immediate danger, tell them I'd rather the son didn't go up. But if they think he ought to, you go up with him."

Barker, and Wordsworth who had been listening in, hung up.

"Do you want me any more, W.W.?" asked Conington.

"No. I don't think so."

At that moment Dorland came in; and just behind Dorland, Quaritch.

Guy Conington rose; saluted with some attempt at smartness, and sidled off, musing, "I shan't half sleep tonight."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

I

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH thoroughly approved of the way in which Barker, at whom they directed every single one of their questions, handled Dorland and Quaritch. The inquiry being conducted in Room Twenty Eight—said Barker—was a routine one. Yes. He had authority to use that room. No. Not from Mr. Scrope-Tarleton. (Who, might he ask, was Mr. Scrope-Tarleton?) His authority came from a Mr. Blinkhorn. Yes. He had heard from the hospital. It looked as though Dowdy were going to recover. A statement would be taken from him as soon as the doctor permitted. Yes. The son had been sent for. From him also, in certain eventualities, a statement would be taken. Why only in certain eventualities? They must excuse him from replying to that question. Actually he had no right to answer any of their questions. He was only a subordinate. Might he suggest that the proper person for the air commodore or Mr. Scrope-Tarleton to approach was the assistant commissioner?

"The inspector's quite right, you know, Dorland," said Quaritch, fairly beaming bonhomie. But just before the pair left, which they did almost at once, he looked at Wordsworth; and not only his eyes but his whole face seemed to change. "Steve don't want no trouble," Wordsworth remembered. And Steve seemed to be getting plenty. Otherwise he and Dorland wouldn't have come busting in to ask so many fool questions.

"What do you make of that?" he asked Barker.

"I don't quite understand it. Tell me some more about

Scrope-Tarleton. He's only a civil servant. But they seem scared to death of the man. And why are they so keen for us to prove that the Dowdys killed Ashdown?"

"The answer to the first question is that they were once civil servants themselves; and to the second that it will be so much easier for all concerned."

"Humph," said Barker; and again, "Humph."

He lit a pipe; and continued to read. Soon, he had turned the last paper in the dossier; and was looking across at Wordsworth.

"Do you play chess?" he asked.

"Occasionally. Why?"

"I was thinking about your black knight," said Barker. "He doesn't seem in a very good position. The two pawns are in better ones. Let's go along and see them, shall we?"

"Tell me something first, Barker."

"Anything I can, Wordsworth."

The ex-chief of police hesitated for a moment. Then he drew a scribbling block towards him, and printed two names on it.

"Do you know anything about those two people?" he asked, tearing off the top leaf and passing it across the desk. "The man's an alien, of course, but the woman may have a British passport."

From the creases on his broad forehead, Wordsworth knew that he had set the inspector quite a puzzle.

"Is this something to do with the case?" he queried.

"It might be."

"You wouldn't care to tell me what makes you think so?"

"Frankly, I'd rather not. At any rate till I know more about the man. It's only a hunch; and if it's a wrong one, you won't thank me for putting up fresh hares."

The creases on Barker's forehead deepened. His pipe went out, and he relit it before he answered:

"I don't know anything about either of them myself, but I'll try to find out for you."

The door opened while Barker was still speaking. A strong Scottish accent announced, "I'm afraid I've no got much for you, sir. This appears to be a most peculiar Meenistry. There's no supervision. People come and go at their own sweet will."

"Not visitors, surely?"

"Veesitors. They're no much different from the pairsonnel. They're just given a pink pass, and conducted to the pairson they wish to see by a messenger."

"So that there is some supervision?"

"To their comings maybe. But no to their goings. As far as I can ascertain they're just shown out of the door of whatever room they happen to be veesiting, given back their pink slip, and left to their own devices."

Barker asked, "Do you confirm that, Wordsworth?"

"Yes. Though I've kicked about it often enough." Wordsworth spoke slowly. "The only control is on the main door. Visitors have to give up their pink slips before they're allowed out, of course."

Barker's brown eyes looked rather scornful. So did the sergeant's, as he continued:

"There's a carbon copy kept of each slip, though some of the names are no very legible. According to the carbons eighty-five slips were issued up to eleven-tharty this morning. But the man in charge on the main door can only produce eighty-two oreeginals. And as for ascertaining how many members of the pairsonnel went to the rooms, or the lobby, or passed along the corridor, it's just no possible, sir, though I've done my best, and here's the list I've made."

He laid several sheets of foolscap before Barker, who pushed them on one side, asking, "Did you get that other messenger?"

"Pink? Aye, we did. But he could no tell us anything worth while."

"Not even about the yellow cups?"

"No, sir. He just uses them indiscreeminately."

"But did Dowdy use them that way?"

"He's no sure, sir. He says Dowdy always ganged his own gait. He'd no let Pink take the cups round if he himself was on duty."

After a few more questions Barker dismissed Sergeant Macphail.

"The sooner we can have a talk with Dowdy the better," he pronounced.

"I agree. Do you mind if I have a look at that list, Barker?"

"Another hunch, Wordsworth?"

"No. A little more than that. I'll tell you about it—after we've seen Dowdy—if I find the name I'm looking for."

But that name did not appear on Sergeant Macphail's list.

2

The girl in the nurse's uniform said, "I'm awfully sorry. You can't go up to your father, yet. But he really is out of danger." "Sez you," thought Edward Dowdy, and scowled.

He thanked her all the same. She went out smiling. For the hundredth time since the major's car had hurried him to this hospital, Edward Dowdy wondered why he should have been received by a policeman, and shown to this particular room. This wasn't—previous experience of visiting relatives in hospital informed him—an ordinary waiting room. It seemed more like a cell. But people were always looking in, especially the policeman, who had brought him a magazine to read, and a pretty good tea, and an evening paper, and shown him where to find the lavatory.

Still—a policeman. After what the Dad had told him yesterday. It didn't look good. It didn't look at all good. Chaps had been arrested for murders they didn't commit before now. It must cost a pretty penny to defend oneself. And how would number three gun get on without him? Hallo. An alert. Jerry was early tonight. Funny how often hospitals got hit. Let's hope they didn't hit this one. That'd

be too bad. With the Dad so ill. What could have happened to him? The nurse said an accident. What kind of an accident? She didn't know—or pretended she didn't. The policeman said he didn't know either. But of course he did. The police knew a lot more than they let on about.

Thought diffused. Queer, Flossie sending for him. Decent of the major to give him another twenty-four hours' leave. Flossie wasn't such a bad girl really. She only wanted a divorce. Had he been a bit weak to promise her one? Ought he to have consulted the Dad before he made that promise? The Dad had kicked up some row when he was told.

"Ah, good evening, Dowdy," said a known voice; and he recognised the Air Force officer who had asked him about Flossie when he visited the troop.

"Good evening to you, sir," he said; and scowled again.

"How's your father getting on?" asked Wordsworth.

"They haven't let me see him yet."

"I say, that's too bad."

"They won't even tell me what kind of an accident he had."

"I can tell you that," said another man of about the same age as the officer, in civvies, with a bowler hat on, who had just entered. "Your father was poisoned."

"Poisoned?" repeated Edward Dowdy. "But how?"

"That's what I'm here to find out," said the man in the bowler hat. "My name's Inspector Barker."

Edward Dowdy said, "Oh, is it?" and his mouth gaped open under his straggly moustache. Then he pinched his almost lobeless right ear between the thumb and first finger of his right hand; and went on:

"The Dad said something about having been threatened with the police by some group captain or other when I saw him yesterday. He said the police might want to talk to me, too. Do you want me to make a statement, because if so I'm quite willing. I've already told *him*"—for the second time he scowled at Wordsworth—"everything I know."

Said Barker, and his rather harsh voice softened a little,

"There's nothing to get excited about, Dowdy. You were quite right to tell Squadron Leader Wordsworth what you did. It always pays to tell the truth. I don't want a statement from you yet awhile. It's your father I really want to talk to. But you might be able to help us if you wouldn't mind answering one simple question. And that's this. Have you ever, at any time, given your father anything with which he could possibly have poisoned himself?"

"No. Never. And I'll take my Bible oath on it, too."

This answer, it seemed to Wordsworth, convinced Barker—as he himself had already been convinced, though by a different chain of reasoning—that the Dowdys must be innocent.

But even while Barker was continuing, "Good man. That's the sort of answer I like getting to a simple question," he felt his mind begin to dither, and concentration snap like a broken wire. "Been at it too long," he thought. "Nothing to eat but a few biscuits since breakfast. Practically no sleep either. Be all in if I'm not careful."

At that moment, the constable appeared. Through the haze which was creeping over him Wordsworth heard the constable say, "The doctor has no objection to our taking a statement now, sir"; and Barker, "You come along, too, Dowdy. You can see your father as soon as I've had my talk with him."

"Got to pull myself together somehow," concluded Wordsworth's personal thinking as they followed the man in police uniform through the doorway and up a flight of stone stairs.

3

Guns fired as the four men made their way past sand-bagged windows to the private ward of the hospital; and, just as they reached the door of the room in which Albert Dowdy had been lying since midday, Wordsworth heard the hollow plops of bursting shells.

Outside the door stood two more men—one, as betrayed

by the stethoscope still round his neck, obviously a doctor; the other, as betrayed by his boots, obviously a plain-clothes detective.

The detective introduced Barker. The doctor said, "He's still pretty weak. Don't keep him longer than you can help. Have you any objections to the nurse remaining with him?" Barker said, "None," and introduced Wordsworth. Edward Dowdy said, "I'm his son. Is he really all right?"

The doctor answered reassuringly. Guns fired again as Barker, Wordsworth, and the detective, who had taken out a notebook, went into the room.

By then Wordsworth's concentration was returning. Albert Dowdy—in bed with the nurse standing by—had no colour in his face. But his eyes, though more bloodshot than ever, showed him fully conscious. The nurse cranked the bed a foot higher. Barker approached it, and began, "I'm afraid you've had rather a bad time, Dowdy. Still, you're lucky to be alive. By the way, your son's outside. You'll be seeing him in a few minutes."

"That's good," said Albert Dowdy, in a weak voice. "But what do *you* want of me?"

"Only to ask you a few questions. You've been poisoned, you know."

"Have I? I don't remember much. Except being sick, and being put in an ambulance."

"Don't you remember making the tea?"

"When?"

"This morning at about eleven o'clock."

"Oh, yes, I can remember that."

Question and answer continued, slowly, so that the detective could take them down. Dowdy, it seemed to Wordsworth, was doing his utmost to answer truthfully; but, on every important point, his memory failed. He couldn't recollect how many cups of tea he'd filled, or what rooms he'd taken them to. Had anyone come into the lobby while he was making the tea or pouring it out? Yes. Several people. The man from registry with a lot of envelopes. A special

messenger from the Ministry of Aircraft Production. And Mr. Silcox. He'd come to know why tea was late, and made a bit of fuss about it. Just when it was ready, too. Anyone else? Well, there might have been. Was this place safe? There seemed to be a raid on.

"Quite safe," Barker assured him. "And now about the cup you yourself drank from? It was a yellow cup, wasn't it?"

Dowdy, apparently tiring, only nodded.

"Did you leave that cup in your lobby while you were taking the others round?"

"No. Leastwise, I don't think so."

"You're not certain?"

"I don't seem certain of anything. I'm feeling so dizzy like. And my mouth's that dry. Can I have a drop of water?"

The nurse filled a tumbler from the carafe on the bedside table; and held it to the patient's mouth. Wordsworth heard Dowdy's teeth chatter against the rim of the glass, and more shells plopping. A sudden apprehension, new to experience, demanded to know whether the single window of this room, hidden by a long blackout curtain, was also sand-bagged. Barker said, "This really is important, Dowdy. Could you possibly have left that yellow cup in the lobby?"

"Well, I might have, though I don't usually leave none of them."

"Never mind what you usually do. What did you do this morning?"

"I tell you I can't remember." Dowdy's voice strengthened, and his temper seemed to be rising. "I don't remember nothing. Not clearly. Why don't you leave me be? You said Ned was outside. Why can't he come in? What's the squadron leader doing here?"

"You'll be seeing your son in a few minutes," repeated Barker. "Squadron Leader Wordsworth is here to help me. Don't you understand what we're trying to do, Dowdy? We're trying to find out who attempted your life."

"Well, I can't tell you that. I can't tell you nothing more. All I really remember is somebody forcing me mouth open, and being sick, and being in the ambulance. My Gawd"—the voice shrilled to a shriek—"this one's going to get us."

But the bomb Dowdy had heard only extinguished the light for three seconds, and burst—Wordsworth judged—more than a quarter of a mile away.

The nurse, one hand on her patient's shoulder, said brightly, "You see, there was nothing to be frightened of." Barker, leaving the bed, whispered to Wordsworth, "It seems pretty hopeless. I think we'd better leave it over till tomorrow. A good night's rest may make all the difference. I suppose you can't suggest anything else I could ask him?"

Once more the twin hazes of sleeplessness and hunger were dulling Wordsworth's mind; and, with the fall of the bomb, apprehension had returned. For the first time, he wanted to take shelter. "I ought to get out of this room," he caught himself thinking. "We all ought to get out of it. It's not safe. I'll swear it's not safe." Yet there was something he wanted even more than to take shelter; something he must know—just in case anything happened to Dowdy before they could see him again. And, fighting his hardest—this also a new experience—to keep the fear in his heart from betraying itself in his voice, he whispered back, "Do you mind if I ask him a couple of questions, myself?"

Barker's forehead creased. He meditated for a moment.

"It wouldn't be usual," he said; then, "But I don't see why not. After all, you know more about this than I do."

He stepped aside. Wordsworth approached the bed, and bent down. Dowdy's bloodshot eyes opened their widest. "You!" they seemed to be saying; and the family scowl crinkled the white face.

"You leave me be, too," protested Albert Dowdy. "You've given me and Ned enough trouble already."

"I'm sorry about that. And I'm sorry about what Group Captain Dorland said to you yesterday. It was none of my

doing that he sent for you, or that he accused you and your son of murdering Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown."

As he spoke, Wordsworth, fear momentarily forgotten, saw the white face change its expression; saw that each carefully chosen phrase had penetrated deeper and deeper into the sick man's understanding.

"I know," he went on, "that you and your son had nothing to do with it. But somebody did murder the air vice-marshal, Dowdy. And the same person attempted another murder this morning. It's the inspector's duty, and mine, to find out who that person is. And you're one of the very few people who can help us. So I want you to try—and to try your very hardest—if you can possibly remember what Mr. Silcox actually said to you when he came in and made a fuss about his tea being late."

"Mr. Silcox?" Dowdy's mind seemed to be wandering. "Mr. Silcox?"

"Yes. You told us he made a fuss, you know. What sort of a fuss? Did he swear at you?"

"Swear?" Dowdy's mind seemed to be clearing. He even attempted a grin. "Swear. Him. He's always swearing."

"But that wasn't all he did. Didn't he tell you something? Didn't what he told you make you change your mind, just when the tea was ready? Wasn't that why you left the yellow cup in the lobby, so that you wouldn't need to pour out another one for yourself? Think. Think your very hardest, Dowdy."

There, Wordsworth paused, eyes on his man, fear still forgotten.

"I am thinking, sir," said Albert Dowdy; and suddenly—while Barker still wondered what the devil Wordsworth could be driving at—one of his great hands clutched at the bedclothes. Then, before the nurse could interfere, he pushed himself bolt upright with the other hand, so that the bedclothes fell away from his great shoulders, and his voice rose to a shriek again as he cried:

"I remember everything now. And I know who done it.

I know who tried to poison me. But I didn't leave that yellow cup in my lobby. It was poisoned before I took it round. I took it round with the others and brought it back again, though Mr. Silcox had told me—had told me——”

The nurse was interfering. She had her hand on his shoulder again. She was trying to push him back on his pillows. “You really mustn't get so excited,” she was saying. And, “Blast the woman,” thought Wordsworth, almost beside himself with his own excitement. “Why can't she leave him alone? Doesn't she realise, can't she understand . . .”

But before his mind could bring that thought to its conclusion, something deafened him, blinded him, flung him round, flung him sideways, flung him flat.

CHAPTER FORTY

I

DIMLY, William Wordsworth began to realise that he was still alive. It seemed to him that he had fallen into some enormous crater; and that every time he struggled to climb out of this crater its sides, which were all black mud, caved in on him, blinding him and binding his hands. Finally he gave up the struggle, and lay still under the mud. This might be death; but if so it seemed a very warm and a very comfortable death, with no pain except a slight pricking, which soon brought even more comfort.

His next realisation was the face of a woman, possibly Gale's. Yet he knew somehow or other that this couldn't be Gale.

The woman's face disappeared. Now he could only see one of her hands. The hand touched his forehead, and his eyelids seemed to snap back.

"Who are you?" he heard a voice, presumably his own, asking.

"Never mind. Just go to sleep again. It will do you good."

He took the advice and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he saw the woman standing by a netted window through which came daylight. He must have made some movement to attract her attention. For she turned at once, and came over, and said, "So you've woken up at last, have you? I thought you were going to sleep for ever. How are you feeling?"

"Thirsty."

"Well, here's some water for you."

He emptied the glass she gave him. While he was doing

so a man, whom he appeared to have seen before, entered; and the woman, who wore nurse's uniform, said, "He's come round."

"Excellent. Let's have a look at his wrist."

She removed a bandage from his left wrist; and the man, now recognisably the doctor with the stethoscope whom he had last heard reassuring Edward Dowdy about his father, examined it. This hurt.

"Is it broken?" asked Wordsworth, wincing a little with the pain.

"No. Only sprained, I think. But we'll have an X ray taken. Just to make sure. You'll be all right in a day or two. Call it a week at the outside."

"A week." Sudden panic overwhelmed Wordsworth. "But you can't keep me here for a week. I've got a job of work to do."

"I'm afraid your work will have to wait."

"I tell you it can't wait. What's the time? How long have I been asleep? Where's Inspector Barker? What happened to Albert Dowdy?"

"Here, steady on. We shall have to give you another shot of morphia if you can't calm yourself."

The sudden panic abated. He heard himself say, "All right. I'll go quiet. Only tell me what happened. It was a bomb, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Was anyone hurt except me?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Who? Barker?"

"No. He and his man escaped with a few bruises. They got down when they heard it coming."

"And Albert Dowdy?"

"You mean the father? I'm sorry to say he was killed. So was the nurse. But young Dowdy's all right. He helped us to pull you out."

Panic returned. So Albert Dowdy had died without telling what he knew. Bad, that. Couldn't be worse. Controlling

panic, he heard Big Ben striking midday. He would have to get up. One must get out of this place, get busy.

"Can you send for Barker?" he asked.

"Not at the moment. Later on perhaps. You really must lie quiet a little longer. Do you think you could manage a little nourishment?"

"Rather. I've had practically nothing to eat since seven o'clock yesterday morning."

One really must control oneself. It was simply no use panicking. What had happened to one's clothes? On that chair? Yes, by jove. Luck, that.

"Tea, and some dry toast. If there's any gas, nurse," said the doctor; and went out.

2

The nurse—thought Wordsworth, sitting up to drink his tea—seemed a very ordinary young woman. One couldn't confide in her, of course. But one might just be able to bluff her. It was worth trying anyhow.

"I wonder if you could do something for me," he began.

"It depends on what you want me to do."

"It's only to send a telephone message. I'm at the Air Ministry. I ought to have been there by nine o'clock. They're sure to be wondering where I am. And"—the bluff seemed to be elaborating itself automatically—"there are one or two rather secret papers in that jacket of mine. I may get into trouble for having taken them away."

"Couldn't I send them back for you?"

"I'm afraid that might only land me into worse trouble, sister. You see, they're the kind of papers that must only be handled by an officer. So if you wouldn't mind ringing up one of my officers"—a good touch, that plural, it seemed to be impressing the girl—"and asking him to come over?"

"But I'm not supposed to leave you alone."

"I'm all right. Really I am. And it wouldn't take you more than five minutes."

After a little more argument, the nurse consented. He gave her Guy's name, the number of the Ministry, and the number of his extension.

"The old brain seems to be functioning again," he thought as she went out.

The old body, however, seemed in worse shape than the brain. His left wrist would obviously be out of action for some time. To judge by the discomfort whenever he moved, he must be considerably bruised. But his legs were all right, thank goodness. And so was his right arm. If only he could get some good solid food inside him. Tea and dry toast, indeed. Why—one was starving. Positively starving.

An alert sounded. To his complete surprise, he found himself shivering with apprehension. This really would not do.

The nurse returned. "I was lucky," she said. "I got on at once. Your flight lieutenant told me to say he'd be coming over in a few minutes. I do hope they won't make a fuss about letting him see you."

But someone knocked, she went to the door, and Guy Conington had entered before Wordsworth, still suffering from that particular apprehension which may affect even the least imaginative immediately after they have been bombed, had quite made up his mind what to do.

"Hallo, W.W.," drawled Guy. "I looked in about an hour ago, but they said you were still doped. Barker told me what happened. You seem to have been damned lucky. How goes it?"

"Oh, not too badly." Thank goodness, that was the all clear just sounding. "Would it be out of order if you left us alone, sister? I've got something rather hush hush to tell the flight lieutenant when I give him those papers."

"Well, don't be long, will you?"

"Not a minute longer than I can help."

She went out again. Guy asked, "What papers do you want to give me, W.W.? She said something about papers when she telephoned."

"That was all bluff," whispered Wordsworth, abruptly

conscious of decision. "I've got to get out of here, Guy. And you'll have to help me, because I'll never manage to dress myself with one hand."

"Dress yourself? Have you gone potty, W.W.?"

"Don't argue. Do as you're told for once. Give me those clothes. And my shoes. There they are. In that corner."

"I'm blowed if I do."

"Damn it all, will you do as I tell you, Guy? Do you imagine I'd be such a b.f. as to get out of bed if I were really hurt? I've only sprained my wrist. There's nothing else the matter with me except a few bruises."

Wordsworth was already out of bed.

"Potty," repeated Guy.

"Don't talk too loud, or that bint'll hear you and come barging in."

The door handle turned while Wordsworth was buttoning his shirt. He called, "Five minutes more, sister. We're nearly done"; and whispered, "You'll have to lace these shoes for me. We won't bother about the collar and tie. I'll turn the collar of my greatcoat up."

Three minutes later, the handle moved again. That time, Wordsworth did not bother to call, because Conington had just helped him on with his jacket.

"All we want now, sister," he said, "is a sling. I see there's plenty of bandage left to make quite a nice one."

She stared at the two men for a second or so. Guy Conington noticed that she had quite nice eyes. Then she turned and ran, skirt rustling, shoes tapping on the bare stone of the corridor.

"Gone with the wind up," drawled Conington.

"Gone for the doctor," snapped Wordsworth. "Now you won't half see some fur fly. Do you know how to make a sling?"

"Yes. I took a first aid course once."

"Well, get on with it."

The rough sling was knotted and round Wordsworth's neck before an unknown doctor had come in on them and

said, "I'm the house surgeon. What's the meaning of this, please?"

"I should have thought that was fairly obvious," answered Wordsworth. "I'm off; and, as far as I know, you've no power to stop me."

"We'll have to see about that." The house surgeon spoke calmly, but even in his own excitement Wordsworth understood what an effort he must be making to control himself.

"I'm awfully sorry," he went on—he, too, controlling himself. "But I shouldn't be doing this if I didn't feel it to be absolutely necessary. And you really can't do anything about it, you know. I'm an officer. I am, as you see, wearing my uniform. This is a civilian hospital. So there's nobody who can give me an order to stay if I want to go. You might call a policeman, of course. But somehow I don't think that would help you. Because an officer in uniform is not liable to arrest one without a warrant unless he's actually committing a misdemeanor."

He turned to Guy and asked to be helped on with his great-coat. The house surgeon, still standing in the doorway, teetered from one foot to the other.

"You're perfectly within your rights," he said; then, suddenly furious, "but don't take that to imply you're not a god-dam fool, even if you are an officer in uniform."

"That's quite possible," admitted Wordsworth, smiling. "But even if I am, do me one favour. Don't make any trouble for sister about this. It wasn't her fault. She hadn't the slightest idea what we were up to."

Guy, who was not wearing his own, picked up Wordsworth's gasmask and helmet. The house surgeon made way for them. Shortly afterwards they were in the street.

3

"Great scene, W.W.," drawled Conington in the taxi they had picked up outside the hospital. "Magnificent performance even if quite unnecessary."

"What do you mean by unnecessary?"

"They couldn't have kept you there against your will. No civilian hospital can detain a patient, unless he's quite bats. And even then it isn't too easy. All that bloke could have done was to make you sign a paper that you were leaving against his advice."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me so?"

"Theirs not to reason why," quoted Conington; and he added, "I'm only a poor flit lit, as we say in the service. You're the squadron leader, and what you say goes."

Wordsworth swore again, and fell silent, hunched in the corner of the taxi. He felt a fool—and he hated feeling a fool. His wrist hurt. His whole body ached. But, thank the Lord, his brain was still functioning—and more clearly than for many days.

"As soon as we get to the R.A.C.," he said, "I'll have a shave and spruce myself up a bit. You telephone Barker—Whitehall one two one two—and say I'll be with him as soon as I can. Before three anyway."

"But Barker's out of it."

"What?"

Wordsworth's monosyllable might have been a pistol shot. The sheer force behind it startled Conington. For once he forgot that cultivated drawl, and snapped back, "Out of it. Sacked. Stellenbosched. He told me so himself."

"You must have misunderstood him. Who's taking the case over?"

"Nobody. Scrope-Tarleton wants it dropped."

They were at the Royal Automobile Club by then. Wordsworth, helped by the porter, descended painfully. "Phone Barker just the same," he ordered, and disappeared through the revolving door.

Paying their taximan, Guy Conington thought, "He's a bit cuckoo today. It's that bomb, I suppose. And he looks as though he'd been pulled backwards through a haystack. Hope he's found the barber's shop still open."

Wordsworth had.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

I

SHAVED and shampooed, with a collar and tie round his neck, Wordsworth looked almost himself again. He had eaten as ravenously as one hand permits; but in complete silence. Conington gave him a cigarette and held out a match. "Time, Guy?" he asked.

"Two-forty-five. By the way, there's a message I forgot. George Ramsay rang up this morning. He told me to tell you that he's off a day earlier than he expected, Monday instead of Tuesday. He'd like to see you before he goes."

"He may have to see more of me than he bargains for."

"Then you think that he——"

"It doesn't matter a damn what I think, Guy. The point is, what can I do? Let's be off. I mustn't keep Barker waiting. And time's short enough anyway."

"What are you getting so worked up about?"

But Wordsworth only frowned, and paid his bill, and went upstairs—they had lunched by the swimming bath—to the cloakroom. He winced as one of the attendants helped him on with his greatcoat; cursed again as they climbed into another taxi.

"Scotland Yard," he called through the window.

"Forgotten your part, haven't you, W.W.?" drawled Conington. "You ought to have said, 'Scotland Yard, and drive like hell.'"

2

Wordsworth dismissed Conington with a peremptory, "It's no use your coming in with me. You toddle back to

King Charles Street and take my gasbag and tin hat with you. The blasted things are too heavy for me. I left my gun in the office last night. Did I remember to lock it up?"

"Yes. I found it in the cupboard this morning."

"Good. This taxi is mine. Remind me to pay you back."

"Okay, W.W." And Conington strolled off.

The constable on the gate of the Yard said, "Inspector Barker? Certainly, sir. That way, sir." Wordsworth acknowledged his salute, crossed the cobbles, and made for the sand-bagged entrance of the main building. Another constable asked his name; took him upstairs in the lift; and said, "You look as if you'd had a crash, sir."

"No. I only got cut over by a bomb."

They passed along a dark landing to a door with scratched paint. In a small outer office a young man in plain clothes sat writing. The constable gave Wordsworth's name and departed. The young man rose and said, "The inspector's on the telephone. He ought to be through any minute." To the inner door, came Barker himself, smiling, "This is a surprise. I thought you'd be out of action for at least a week." He led through the doorway into a slightly larger room. Electric light—the window overlooking the river had been bricked up—showed cold walls, a desk, on which stood a couple of telephones, and three plain wooden chairs.

"That was a narrow squeak last night," said Barker when they had seated themselves. "You heard about poor old Dowdy, I suppose?"

"Yes. And I hear you've been ordered to lay off."

Barker frowned, and began to load a pipe. Wordsworth managed to undo his coat, and fumbled for his cigarette case.

"Are you allowed to tell me why you were laid off?" he asked.

"Well, I don't suppose I ought to. But perhaps you'd better know."

Barker's story—it seemed to Wordsworth—was a little disingenuous. He had received his instructions from the assistant commissioner. In view of the fact that the attempt

to poison Dowdy had not succeeded, and of his subsequent death by enemy action, it hardly seemed worth while—the A.C. considered—to pursue what promised to be a most difficult inquiry. As for the death of Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown—naturally he, Barker, had brought that up too—the assistant commissioner had been talking to the Air Ministry personally. The Ministry hardly thought they could put that up to the Special Branch as a clear case of murder. They might do so, however, after further investigation. In the meantime they had to consider one specific obstacle, a minute from the technical authority concerned.

"Negresco's minute," Wordsworth told himself. Aloud he said, "So we're snookered?"

"I certainly am," admitted Barker. "I can't go behind the A.C."

He frowned again, and blew a cloud of smoke from his strong mouth.

"But I don't like it, Wordsworth," he went on.

"Neither do I."

They looked at each other for quite a while without speaking.

"It's an awful pity that bomb got old Dowdy," said Barker suddenly. "If he'd told us what he knew, we might have had the poisoner under arrest by now. Those questions of yours were certainly doing the trick. The operative word seemed to be Silcox. Have you any idea what that fellow Silcox did tell Dowdy?"

"I've more than an idea. But it's easy enough to make sure. Silcox'll tell me himself. By the way, Barker what made you so certain that the Dowdys had nothing to do with killing Ashdown?"

Barker hesitated. "Go on," Wordsworth prompted him. "You're not talking officially."

The inspector blew another smoke cloud before he answered, "Presuming Ashdown was killed in the way you've suggested, the murderer had more brains than the two Dowdys put together."

"And certain sources of information."

"I don't quite follow that, I'm afraid."

"Don't you, Barker? Doesn't it seem to you that if you'd planted that phony shell with the idea of having it taken for genuine, you'd have wanted to make as certain as humanly possible that our guns should be actually firing when it exploded?" And once more they looked at each other for quite a while without speaking; till, suddenly once more, Barker objected:

"No. I see what you're driving at. But it's too far-fetched. Really it is. After all, the guns fire most nights. And anyway, even if you do happen to be right—which I hope to God you aren't—what can I do about it? I oughtn't even to be discussing the thing with you."

"Couldn't you put it up to the A.C. again?"

"On those lines? With the Ministry saying they don't want any further inquiries made? No, I don't see that working. Honestly, I don't."

"But surely you can see that, whoever tried to poison Dowdy—" began Wordsworth.

There, however, he in his turn hesitated; and broke off abruptly; his eyes, his whole attitude, despondent. For what was the use of going on? His original judgment of this man had been right. Barker knew his job. He couldn't be brow-beaten, and he was nobody's yes-man. But he did lack—that "too far-fetched" proved it—the finer flights of imagination. Moreover, he was only, as he had told Dorland and Quaritch, "a subordinate."

"Like I am," thought Wordsworth bitterly; and controlled himself once more; and rose; and held out his unwounded hand, smiling, "You're damn right, old man. You certainly are snookered. So I mustn't worry you any more. I'll just have to play my own hunch my own way."

Then he put one direct question; and Barker, taking a paper from his desk, answered with the same directness:

"I made the inquiry first thing this morning, before the A.C. told me we were to lay off. Here's what I got from the

Aliens Branch. It won't help you much, I'm afraid, though the pair of them seem to be fairly intimate. Anyway they live on the same floor of the Fantastic. You were right about her having a British passport, but she has an American one too. The man, of course, enjoys diplomatic immunity."

"He'd have to," thought Wordsworth. But again it seemed better to keep his mouth shut; so, stuffing the paper into the right-hand pocket of his greatcoat, he only said, "Thanks awfully," and turned to go.

"You'll have to be shown off these premises," laughed Barker, touching a desk bell. "We're not like the Air Ministry. Let me know if I can do anything else for you."

And he also added "old man," thinking, "I wonder how he means to play that hunch of his. He won't stick at much, by the look of him."

For even if Inspector Barker's imagination could not soar to the highspots of fancy, he was no bad judge of a man.

3

A man can run from Scotland Yard across Whitehall to the archway of King Charles Street inside the minute; Wordsworth, walking painfully, did the journey in five. Despondency was still on him, and a black rage against all officialdom. How many men had died for officialdom in the last war? How many would die for it in this? "One at least, if Dorland, Quaritch, Scrope-Tarleton and company go on muddling," he thought; and hurried the last few yards to the door of the Air Ministry. There, he made straight for Room Forty Two.

The door of that room was locked; but from the next one came the clack of a typewriter. He went in. At the machine sat Miss Loftus. She stopped typing; looked up at him through her spectacles, and said, "Good afternoon, squadron leader, You do seem to have been in the wars. Sir George has gone, I'm afraid. He won't be back till tomorrow, and then only for an hour or two."

"Is Mr. Silcox about?"

"Mr. Silcox? I'm sorry. But he isn't. Sir George sent him North to fetch something he wanted early this morning. He won't be back till tomorrow either."

"Oh, damn."

Miss Loftus registered disapproval. Wordsworth apologised, and—thinking, "She may know; it isn't really so vital"—went on, "Perhaps you can help me. Yesterday morning at about a quarter to eleven I met Sir George in Bond Street. Do you happen to remember what time he came back to the office?"

Miss Loftus registered profound meditation.

"Not actually," she said at last. "But I think it was about twelve o'clock."

"He wasn't here by eleven anyway?"

"Oh, no. At least I don't think so."

Further questions—one must, it seemed to Wordsworth, go very gingerly—produced similar answers, very typical of the service to which Miss Loftus belonged. She would not even commit herself to the one statement, "Sir George does take a cup of tea at eleven o'clock," without qualifying it by, "At least he usually does, but then very often he doesn't." And to Wordsworth's last, most important question about the yellow cup, she answered, "I really couldn't say, squadron leader," breaking off to ejaculate, "Oh, Elsie, I'm so glad you managed to come down. Sir George thought you'd be sure to remember what happened to one of his files. He thinks he sent it to D.S.R.,* but he can't be sure. It was while I was away ill, dear."

Wordsworth excused himself. As he left the room he heard Elsie King say, "Oh, that one. Why, he took it home himself, the day before you came back. Yes, I'm quite certain."

"I know what I'd do if I was certain," he thought as he made for the lift.

* Director of Scientific Research.

4

In his own room Wordsworth found Izod taking a cup of tea with Conington.

"Tony's over the worst," Izod told him. "I hear you've been through a pretty rough time. You ought to go to my bonesetter man about that wrist of yours. Doctors muck one about so. I'll give you his name and telephone number, if you like."

"Thanks."

Izod gave the name and number. Conington, having written them down, drawled, "It looks as though you were in for a spot of trouble, W.W. Daddy Dorland's been on the phone three times since I returned to this abode of love and A.I., which I always presume stands for Alleged Intelligence. He wants to see you immediately."

"He can't want to see me half as much as I want to see him. Don't you go till I get back, Guy."

"Okay, W.W." And Wordsworth heard Guy Conington whistling the first few bars of "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," as he went out.

Wordsworth had taken off his greatcoat but was still wearing his fore-and-aft cap. Daddy's door stood ajar. He entered, clicked his heels and saluted.

"Where have you been since lunch?" asked Dorland. "And what the deuce do you mean by leaving hospital against orders?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," answered Wordsworth.

The old trick worked with the old gentleman, who repeated his questions, explaining that the hospital authorities had been on the telephone "kicking up the devil's own fuss with Air Commodore Quaritch about your behaviour."

Wordsworth, still standing to attention, said, "I had a perfect right to leave the hospital, sir; and as for my whereabouts since lunchtime, I've been at Scotland Yard."

For a moment, Dorland sat speechless. The blue eyes under the golden eyebrows goggled like the eyes of a stuffed fish.

His thinning cheeks flushed from the colour of wood port to the deep ruby of vintage.

"You had no right whatever to do that," he said finally.

"I'm sorry, sir"—something of the Horse Gunner's discipline still remained in William Wordsworth—"but I only did what I conceived to be my duty."

"Well, don't go to Scotland Yard again. You'll only make more trouble. And, take it from me, you've made quite enough already. I'm very disappointed in you, Wordsworth. Very disappointed indeed."

The ex-chief of police relaxed from attention, and moved towards the desk. His wrist was hurting considerably—and his temper only just in leash.

"For what reason, sir?" he inquired.

During a longer moment, Dorland sat speechless.

"Keeness is one thing," he said at last. "But exceeding one's duty is another. Wing Commander Staveleigh came to see me this morning. He informs me that, during my absence, you spent a whole day at Blessingford. Who gave you permission to go to Blessingford?"

"Nobody, sir."

"Then why did you go and who did you see when you got there?"

Wordsworth, remembering his promise to Grandfather Manders, answered, "I went there to conduct further investigations into the death of Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown, sir."

The evasive answer seemed to gratify Dorland. "Just as I thought," he said, in his best orderly-room manner. "And who, may I ask, authorised you to conduct any investigations into the death of Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown?"

"Group Captain Langfordson, sir."

"You maintain that?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Then how do you explain this?"

Dorland fumbled among a mass of papers that littered his desk, and passed over a blue minute form, its ink scarcely

dry, on which Wordsworth read, "2. I did not authorise or order Squadron Leader Wordsworth to conduct any investigation into the death of Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown. All I asked him for was a report. I understood that he had made this report direct to A/C Quaritch. This is all I know about the matter. L. Langfordson, G/Cpt."

"Well?" inquired Dorland, still with a note of gratification in his voice. And on that, Wordsworth began to speak his mind.

5

Wordsworth, still on his feet, had been speaking his mind for five minutes. A last mite of the old discipline was still in him. So far, he had not used a single word, a solitary phrase, to which a superior officer could take exception. He had only used sarcasm. Group Captain Langfordson's minute was . . . a perfect model of minute-writing. The difference between asking an officer to make a report, and ordering—or authorising him—to conduct an investigation should have been patent to the meanest intelligence. One could only apologise if one's own intelligence had misconstrued it. As for Wing Commander Staveleigh, no doubt his ripe age ("Thirty-four, I believe, sir") and ample experience of Security justified the close supervision he appeared to exercise over mere squadron leaders. Meanwhile, nevertheless, the facts remained that one murder had actually been committed, and another attempted.

"I dispute both those facts," interrupted Dorland. "And anyway it's none of your business now, Wordsworth."

"But, good God, sir, don't you see——"

"All I see, Wordsworth"—that time Dorland emphasized the interruption by rising—"is that you're in a considerable state of excitement. Doubtless you're suffering from shock. The hospital authorities rather suggested you might be. So if you take my advice you'll go home and lie down. Otherwise you may say something you'll be sorry for."

"Not half as sorry as you'll be if you don't listen to what I've got to say," burst out Wordsworth; and, half turning his head as the door opened, saw Steve Quaritch entering the room.

"Just looked in to tell you I was off," began Quaritch, and stopped.

"Last chance of knocking some sense into their heads." The thought flashed through Wordsworth's furious brain as he saluted. "If Quaritch won't listen to me either, they can both sugar themselves."

But Dorland was already forestalling him with a quiet, "I've just been explaining to Wordsworth that his conduct won't do. After he broke out of hospital, he had the audacity to go to Scotland Yard."

"And I, sir"—there was nothing quiet about that interruption—"have just been trying to explain to Group Captain Dorland that, since Air Vice-Marshal Ashdown was undoubtedly murdered, and a deliberate attempt was made to poison——"

"That will do, Wordsworth. That will do."

As he spoke Quaritch's John Bull of a face lost its last trace of bonhomie. His lips pursed, under sucking upper. Then, "That will do," he said for the third time; and went on:

"I think I heard Group Captain Dorland tell you to go home and lie down. Kindly do so. I shall be here on Monday morning. If there's anything you wish to explain to me or to Group Captain Dorland you can explain it then."

6

Three inflections are possible when a regular British officer concludes a sentence with the word "sir." The most usual implies an equal respect for discipline in general and the senior one happens to be addressing in particular. The monosyllable "sir," especially if prefaced by "Rather," "Certainly," or "That's my own opinion," may also imply the

personal affection or admiration of its user. But the third inflection carries nothing but contempt.

The "sir" with which Wordsworth followed his "Very good" to Quaritch belonged unmistakably to the third category. He saluted the pair of them, and turned on his heels.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

I

"WHAT the devil's the matter now, W.W.?" asked Guy Conington as Wordsworth slammed the door of their office behind him.

"Nothing." To the other's surprise his squadron leader did not let out even one oath. But there was no blood in his cheeks. His eyes blazed. And his whole body shook with temper.

After a moment or so, he controlled the shaking, and sat down at his desk.

"Get me the Hotel Fantastic," he barked suddenly. "Say I want to speak to Mrs. Ogilvy."

"Mrs. who?"

"Ogilvy."

"All right, keep your wool on, W.W."

The dark eyes in the white face were still blazing as Guy looked up the number of the hotel in the tattered public directory which he had brought with him—none being supplied by the Ministry—when he left his own flat.

But by the time Conington said, "Is that Mrs. Ogilvy? You'll fetch her. Thanks so much," Wordsworth's whole expression had changed. He was actually smiling as he picked up his own instrument, and waited. His, "Oh, is that you, Mrs. Reggie? Good. I was afraid you might be away as it's Saturday. You told me you were nearly always visible between five and seven," might almost have been a lover's.

That Wordsworth must be acting, however, seemed tolerably sure.

The conversation—to which Conington did not listen in—

was over in a few sentences. Hanging up, Wordsworth looked at the watch he now wore on his right wrist.

"Five o'clock," he said. "Time our blackout blind was drawn. We'll have to do it ourselves tonight."

"You mean, I'll have to do it."

Conington drew down the blind. W.W.'s expression had changed again.

"Just let me have a look at that dossier," he went on, in what Conington called his "no questions" voice. "And there's a piece of paper in my greatcoat pocket. I wonder if you'd mind getting it for me."

Wordsworth studied the paper as though he were memorising it, and attached it to the others in the dossier. Conington ventured, "How about tomorrow? Oughtn't you to take it off? I phoned that bonesetter chap Izod told us about. He said he didn't usually see patients on Sunday, but he'd come up specially because he was such a pal of Izod's. So I fixed a provisional appointment for a quarter to eleven."

"Thanks awfully, Guy. Sorry if I was a bit sergeant-majorish just now. Do you mind missing your half-day Sunday for once?"

"My dear W.W., of course I don't."

"Good."

Once more Wordsworth's expression changed. Some new thought seemed to strike him. He rifled through the dossier; picked up the telephone; and was soon saying, "Hallo, Blinkhorn. I thought you might have gone. Can you tell me something? How long before Ashdown took over Room Twenty Eight was the transfer of rooms actually agreed on? About a couple of days, you think? Three at the outside? Thanks."

He made a note on the same paper in the dossier, told Conington to put it back in the cupboard, and demanded his pistol.

"Where's yours?" he asked. "You haven't been wearing it lately."

"In the drawer of my desk. Locked up, of course."

"I'd put it in the cupboard if I were you. You'll have to help me on with this ruddy equipment of mine. I'll leave my tin hat and gasbag here. Can I give you a lift as far as the Fantastic?"

"Thanks, W.W.; but I'm not going that way."

2

A taxi drove up to the Air Ministry and decanted its passenger as Wordsworth came out of the main door. The driver made rather a fuss about taking another passenger. He'd like to get home before any raid started.

"I only want you to run me up to the Fantastic," said Wordsworth.

"All right, governor. In you get."

Having hauled himself painfully aboard, Wordsworth wondered if he were doing the right thing. "May not be," he decided. "I shall have to go pretty pussyfoot, otherwise I may do more harm than good."

The doorkeeper of the Fantastic helped him out, and greeted him by name. A reception clerk said, "Mrs. Ogilvy? Just a moment, sir"; and, after telephoning, "Mrs. Ogilvy says you're to go up, sir. Page!"

The page escorted Wordsworth into the lift, and out of it along the bright, softly carpeted corridor, to the door of a suite which was opened at his first knock by Elvira Ogilvy herself.

"It was such a nice surprise when you telephoned," she began. "My maid's out this afternoon. She's the same one I had in Cape Remittance. You remember—Katinka?"

Chatting on, she led him into an ornate sitting room, only lit by bracket lights with dark red shades.

"Aren't I silly?" she said. "I forgot to ask you to take your coat off. Never mind. Just throw it on that sofa. Oh, but you've hurt yourself. You poor man. Do let me help you."

As she assisted him to take off his coat, Wordsworth's

nostrils were pleasantly aware of scent. Her reception of him had been admirable. He must have played his own part on the telephone rather well, too.

There was another sofa, deep and large and piled with cushions. She sank into it, saying, "Come and sit here. Only press that bell, first. Once for the waiter. What shall we have? I'm rather in favour of sidecars."

A waiter appeared with fantastic suddenness. She ordered two double sidecars. Wordsworth noticed the shortness of her dark skirt, the contrast of the brightly coloured blouse, the perfection of her blond hair, the bracelets and the rings she wore, as he sat down beside her.

"And now tell me," she went on, "what happened to your poor arm?"

She touched the sling as she spoke.

"I ought to be on your other side," she went on, ever so faintly arch. "But you've got your gun there. Do you always wear it when you're visiting with ladies? Shall I help you off with that, too?"

"Please don't bother, Mrs. Reggie. It's such a pest getting it on again."

As he explained about his wrist, he remembered how much the American woman she had been when she first married Reggie Howes; and that, at the Trianon, she had affected an intonation almost more English than the English. She had slipped up, though, when she said "visiting with."

"A bit nervous?" he wondered, asking, "And how is your friend the baron?"

"I haven't seen much of him since Wednesday night. He's all right as far I know. And how is your friend Gale?"

Her riposte was a definite hit.

"Such a nice girl," she continued. "And quite a lady. I wonder you're not in love with her."

The implication was obvious. Quizzing him, her eyes seemed to say, "But of course if you were in love with her, you wouldn't have come to see me." A really poisonous

woman, but still attractive, and as dangerous as a striking cobra. So perhaps one had better strike first.

"Miss Johnson is very well," said Wordsworth coldly. "I saw her yesterday. I really came to see you on business, Mrs. Reggie."

"My dear man, how dull."

Her parry had been as quick as her riposte. She quizzed him again, smoothing a blond curl with ringed fingers.

"What kind of business?" she asked. "Not Air Ministry business, surely?"

"No, Mrs. Reggie. Oil."

His point went clean through her guard. The fingers came away from the curl. Her body stiffened. He could see the toes curling in her thin shoes.

"I don't get you," she said.

"Don't you? Then let me make myself a little clearer. Your late husband was a director of Cape Remittance Consolidated. What I'm suggesting is that he told you that oil had been struck in the hinterland, and that you, and the French gentleman who accompanied you back to Europe, took advantage of that information by buying a large block of shares on the Paris market."

"So what?"

Anger, and maybe a touch of fear, had ripped the English veneer clean off her. She was all the American again—and raw East Side New Yorker at that.

"So what?" she repeated.

"Oh, nothing much. Except that you and your French friend promptly transferred both your holdings to a German company, and that those holdings gave the Germans the right to appoint a director in place of your late husband."

"I wouldn't know anything about that."

The waiter, entering with their cocktails, gave her a little time for recovery. She took a glass from the tray; but her hand shook, spilling a few drops on her skirt.

"I must go get this off at once," she said, half rising.

"There's really no need for that, madam. Allow me."

The waiter dabbed at the few spots with his serviette; went off to the bathroom for "just a drop of hot water, madam," and returned quickly. He dabbed at her skirt again, and then wiped the bottom of her glass. She drank half the double sidecar at a gulp. When they were alone once more Wordsworth said:

"I appear to have distressed you, Mrs. Reggie. I wonder why. After all—apart from the morals of the thing—there was nothing so very wrong in what you did. We weren't at war with Germany then."

He emphasized the last word; and his eyes held hers.

"Then," he repeated. "Do you see what I'm driving at, Mrs. Reggie?"

There was still anger in her eyes, but now fear—as far as one could judge in that poor light—seemed to predominate. She emptied her glass; put it down on the little table by the sofa.

"No, I don't," she said.

"Are you sure?" Wordsworth spoke very slowly. "It might pay you to come clean, Mrs. Reggie. We're pretty lenient with women in this country. And of course you may not be an enemy agent. You may only be—shall we say consorting with one. After all—again apart from the morals of the thing—there's nothing so very wrong in that either. Unless you happen to know that your—er—consort is working for the enemy."

He stopped there, feeling that he had said enough. His dark eyes, however, still held hers very steadily; and, just for the split of a second, he read sheer panic in them. Her right hand made a gesture towards her throat and came away again; her left clutched at her skirt.

Then that hand, too, came away; and her mouth sagged open, showing him three of her lower teeth stopped with gold. Her eyes were trying to avoid his. "Hooked her," he thought.

But at that very instant she sprang up, so suddenly that

her elbow jarred against the sling he wore, making his wrist hot agony.

"You're bats," panted her mouth. "You're nuts. You get the hell out of here."

He got to his feet, picked up his coat, and went from her—still in pain, but not altogether displeased with himself.

For his suggestions about her part in that Cape Remittance Consolidated share-transaction had been largely based on guesswork—shots in the dark.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

I

By the time that Wordsworth, still with his greatcoat on his right arm, reached the ground floor of the Fantastic, his left wrist was about as painful as he could bear. He made for the cloakroom; asked the attendant to help him take off his jacket and equipment, and ran cold water over the joint for a good five minutes. Meanwhile he thought, "If only Barker were on the job too. Then we could tap her telephone. Bound to be some reaction." But what more could a man do on his own? Precious little here.

Dressed again, he meditated making one more inquiry at the reception desk; but decided to do nothing more at the Fantastic. Already he had played his hunch (and Boulte's, though Boulte had never even heard of Elvira Ogilvy) to the limit—and perhaps beyond.

Sirens shrieked as he came out of the hotel; but the door-keeper found him a taxi. "Curzon Mansions," he told the driver; and, arriving there to a salvo of gunfire, he asked, "Do you mind waiting for me?"

"Gawd bless your soul, of course I don't, sir. Used to drive lorries through Wipers, I did."

"Good man. I don't expect I shall be long. If I am, I'll send the money down."

The porter of the Mansions didn't know if Mrs. Ashdown were in or not. He rather thought she'd gone away for the weekend. He took Wordsworth up in the lift. Millicent Ashdown's manservant, appearing at the elaborate front door, pronounced, "Madam won't be back till late tomorrow night, sir. She is flying to Lisbon on Monday." Asked if he

knew where one could communicate with her, he said, "I'm afraid not, sir."

"You don't happen to know where I could get hold of Sir George Ramsay, I suppose?" asked Wordsworth; and realised, from the man's demeanour, that he had committed a social error.

"Sir George Ramsay, sir? No. I don't."

In the street once more Wordsworth—thinking, "Snookered again, can't do a ruddy thing till tomorrow"—decided on an early dinner, and told the taximan to drive him to his club.

"Back entrance I suppose, sir?" asked the taximan.

"No. The front one, of course."

"But you can't get in there, sir. It's been blitzed."

"When?"

"Sometime last night. Lots of members killed, a pal told me. But he's a bit apt to draw the longbow."

A short drive proved that the taxidriver's pal had certainly drawn on his imagination—only one member being dead, and one seriously wounded. The main building, however, as seen from the back entrance, looked a complete wreck.

"The Bath Club's taking us in, sir," said the hall porter, who was not wearing his livery. "And so's the Cavalry. It's a pity about the poor old Colonel, sir. He's been living here ever since South Africa."

"A great pity," agreed Wordsworth; and gave the taximan his own address.

The effect of the cold water had worn off. His wrist was hurting again. The sight of the wrecked clubhouse—not that he had ever been overfond of the place—seemed to be depressing him. He would just have a snack and go to bed with a double dose of Guy's "Sedquik," be fresh for tomorrow. But the porter at his own flats told him, as he helped him out of the taxi, "There's a lady and gentleman been inquiring for you, sir. They said they'd look back in about half an hour on the chance of catching you." And, just as

he was fumbling to pay off his driver, the unmistakable voice of Champagne Charlie boomed through the murk, "Is that you, W.W.?"

He could just see that Champagne Charlie had some kind of a girl with him. The girl materialised in the doorway as Flossie Desvoeux.

2

There was nothing for it, with Champagne Charlie saying, "The kid and I were just going to have a bite and a bottle, so we thought we'd look you up on the way, old boy," except to invite the pair in for a drink. From the moment Flossie entered his sitting room, however, Wordsworth realised that there must be some ulterior purpose to this visit. She was so obviously in a state of nerves. Her small blue eyes, though still predatory, gave one the impression that she had just been crying; and while Champagne Charlie, who had not noticed the sling till one shrugged oneself out of one's greatcoat, made the usual inquiry (and received the usual answer) she kept them fixed on him. Her, "I'm so sorry, Bill. I do hope you're not in pain," failed to convey the slightest sympathy. It was a mere remark, called for by a mere circumstance in which she had no interest whatsoever.

"Never mind about the drinks for a moment, W.W., old boy," Champagne Charlie blurted out when Wordsworth suggested he should mix them. "To tell you the truth, the kid's worried to death, and I thought you might be able to help her."

"If I can," said Wordsworth. "Go on."

Flossie had seated herself on a hard chair. It seemed to Wordsworth that she was ageing. Lines showed round her carmine-slashed lips.

"How can Bill help?" she asked. "How can anybody? You don't know what the police are like, Charlie. They ferret and ferret about till they find out everything. And for all I know that old swine may have had something to

do with it. A nice position that'll put me in. It's bound to come out that I'm his daughter-in-law——"

"Now you shut up, kiddo," interrupted Champagne Charlie; and, turning to Wordsworth, "As far as I can make out her husband told her—he was on leave the day before yesterday—that there was some question of a police inquiry into . . . you know, that case you told me about. He said his father was for it, and that it looked as though he might be. The poor kid's scared. And no wonder. You know what publicity means in her job."

Flossie's eyes were on Wordsworth by then. Inside another minute she would be weeping again. So she couldn't have seen Ned Dowdy since the day before yesterday.

He asked her that first.

"No," she answered. "The last I saw of Ned was after I'd given him supper. He'd only had a few minutes with his father, so he was going back to spend the night with him." And, "Whatever his father's been up to," she added, "I'll swear Ned didn't have anything to do with it. Ned's a gentleman, he is. He's promised me my divorce, never mind what that old swine's got to say about it.."

"That old swine, as you call him," said Wordsworth, "was killed by a bomb last night. And there's nothing for you to worry about, because there isn't going to be a police inquiry."

"Thank Gawd for that," exclaimed Flossie, relapsing into the vernacular. "Not that I ain't sorry about Ned's father, of course."

The tears that ensued—it seemed to William Wordsworth—only signified relief.

3

For the first and only time in their long acquaintance, Champagne Charlie had refused a drink. "Don't you bother, old boy," Wordsworth remembered his saying, while Flossie plied his khaki handkerchief. "The kid and I'll have a snifter

at the Mirabelle. You look pretty well all in. I should take it easy for a bit. How about a week's leave? That's what I'm on.

"And if my week's leave don't cost me three months' pay," he had whispered in the doorway, "it won't be her fault. Still—anything's better than marrying 'em."

Oh, well—thought Wordsworth—every man to his taste. He was dining by then—still to occasional gunfire. The gunfire was distant, thank goodness. Tonight he couldn't have stood much of a pasting. Soon, he'd take his Sedquik. Then he wouldn't hear anything. But one might as well have a cigar first.

The cigar was the last in the box. Having cut and lit it, not without more pain when he used the fingers of his left hand, he caught himself thinking, "Shan't be able to afford many of these once I'm married." But after the first puff or so, with the pain abating to mere discomfort, he began to think about Scrope-Tarleton. Why had Scrope-Tarleton—because he must be at the bottom of it, Dorland and Quaritch, as Barker said, being obviously under his thumb—refused to allow any further investigation? His reason seemed equally obvious. He must think George Ramsay had murdered Ashdown. Whereas George Ramsay . . .

And at that, with the guns growling again, Wordsworth felt every nerve in his body begin to jangle. Where was Ramsay at this moment? How soon would he be back? Millicent Ashdown must be going with him to America. But would either of them ever reach America?

The telephone bell made him jump in his chair. "It's happened, it's happened already," urged his imagination. But the voice at the other end of the wire was Gale's, asking, "William, is that you? William dear, how are you? Are you out of pain? Have you been to that osteopath?"

"So Izod's been spilling beans," laughed Wordsworth, his relief matching Flossie's. "I'm seeing his bone bloke tomorrow. Meanwhile I'm not too bad, all things considered."

"You're telling me the truth?"

"Of course I am. It's only a sprain and a few bruises."

She asked for details. He gave most of them.

"I wish you'd take more care of yourself," she complained. "That's the second time you've been hurt."

"Well, it's not my fault. Three times lucky. The next one'll probably be a dud."

"Don't, William. Please. I just can't bear you to talk like that. If you knew how anxious I've been. And it's taken me hours to get your number."

Her anxiety was very pleasant; but his position at the telephone rather uncomfortable. His cigar looked like going out, too.

"Don't fuss so," he said a trifle sharply.

"But I can't help fussing. William dear, must you go on living in London? It's so dangerous."

"It isn't as dangerous as that; and we can't all get extra petrol for our Rolls-Bentleys."

"Now you're cross with me."

"I'm not a bit cross, my sweet"—nice, to hear her so humble!—"but you are being rather foolish."

The wire went silent for a few seconds. Then Gale said, "Am I? How would you like it if I were in London every night, and you were in the country?"

"I shouldn't like it at all," admitted Wordsworth, laughing again in spite of his physical discomfort. What the deuce did it matter if his cigar went out, either? Gale cared for him—she cared a lot. Her mere anxiety proved that much. Why not try to prove more?

"But you're not living in London, worse luck," he went on. "Otherwise you could come here and play the ministering angel."

"I can't see you having much use for that kind of angel." Gale, too, laughed.

"Perhaps you're right. I told you once—or didn't I?—that I'm not a very domesticated animal. But I think I could be—in certain circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

Had he only imagined it, or did the tone convey an invitation? "Chance the thing anyway," he decided, and said slowly, "The principal circumstance, in fact it's a *sine qua non*, is that you should undertake the task of domestication. Are you game to?"

The wire went silent again before Gale said, "I went to your House of Commons once. As your Ministers say, I must have notice of that question."

"Haven't you had enough notice already?"

"Maybe I have. But—need I give you my answer on the telephone? It seems so . . . so very un-British."

"You've only got to say 'yes,' you know, darling."

And, "Yes, darling," after another moment's hesitation, said Gale.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

I

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH's first mood, when he woke on that Sunday morning, was sufficiently poetic to justify his name. One of the last things Gale had said overnight, "I don't believe in long engagements either," still echoed in his recollection. He saw the wedding ring already on her finger, and imagination carried the mental picture a good deal beyond that. War or no war, they were going to be happy. The Flossies for Champagne Charlie, his own bride for him.

Cold on the heels of this mood, however, came a fresh attack of his own particular and peculiar awareness. Catastrophe impended. Possibly today. Certainly by tomorrow. And nobody could prevent this catastrophe except oneself.

"Shots in the dark," he thought. "Mine hit the bull's eye all right. Mrs. Reggie's in it. Her boy friend's in it. But how am I going to prove a thing against either of them? How am I going to prove who planted that shell in the locker, and who poisoned Dowdy, without anyone to help me?"

Be damned if he knew.

The valet had brought a cup of tea to his bedside. He lifted himself on his left elbow; sipped, thinking, "You b.f. This one can't be poisoned"; and drank. His wrist seemed a shade less painful; but some of his bruises—especially the one about which he had not given details to Gale—made getting out of bed an operation. The effect of the Sedquik, moreover—or could it be the after effect of the morphia they had given him in hospital?—did not seem to have quite worn off.

"Feel a crock," continued his thoughts. "Feel dithery.

And just the day I ought to be at the top of my form."

A cigarette helped. Exercising ingenuity, he managed to shave himself; to climb into and out of his bath; to don underclothes, shirt and a dressing gown. "You'll have to send me the valet when I've eaten this," he told the waiter who brought his breakfast. "I'll never get the rest of my togs on without somebody to help me."

Damn it, he wanted more help than that.

The telephone rang while he was eating; and, once again, imagination made him jump in his chair.

"No," he stormed. "This isn't Mayfair double six, double six."

"Sorry you've been troubled," said the voice at the other end of the wire.

He finished his food, and poured out another cup of coffee. Skin had gathered on the milk, and the blasted waiter had forgotten to bring his strainer from the kitchenette. He drank the coffee black, and lit another cigarette. The smoke made him cough.

"Jitters," he thought next. "Can't afford 'em. Especially today."

The valet proved a clumsy dresser. It was nearly a quarter to ten by the time he buckled the blue webbing shoulder strap to the belt on which Wordsworth carried his gun.

"Wonder you bother to wear this, sir," said the valet. "Very few gentlemen seem to nowadays. And those that do, wear them on the left hip."

"More fools they, unless they're left-handed," snapped Wordsworth.

"But it's regulation, sir."

"Only since we gave up carrying swords. What's the weather like today?"

"A bit on the mild side."

"Then I won't bother about a greatcoat. Thanks for helping me. Have a drink, won't you?"

"Always willing to oblige, sir. Thank you, sir."

The valet, who had jarred Wordsworth's slung arm,

pocketed his extra shilling, and went out. Wordsworth lit yet another cigarette; and sat down on his bed for a while. Funny, that so many people seemed to have had what seemed good motives for killing Ashdown. What was the real killer's motive? Just money? No. Too big a risk.

The telephone rang once more. Startled once more, he hurried into the sitting room, only to hear Gale's, "Good morning, darling. I rang up to find out how you slept. Do let me know what the osteopath has to say. And promise me you'll take it easy today. No going down to the office." He meditated telling her the truth, but prevarication seemed easier.

"I must go down for an hour or two," he prevaricated. "But I promise you I'll come home as soon as ever I can."

"And that you'll ring me up to tell me what the osteopath says."

"Yes, darling."

"Well, don't forget."

She hung up. He looked at his wristwatch; and decided he'd soon have to be off.

2

"If you'd only come to me immediately this happened," said Izod's bone man, who was about Wordsworth's own age and looked like an ex-football player, "I shouldn't have had to hurt you at all. As it is, I shan't hurt you much. How do you like being back in the Air Force?"

"Oh, it's not too bad."

"Feel anything?"

"No."

While the man spoke the spatulate fingers of both his hands had been playing with Wordsworth's left palm, lower forearm and wrist. Suddenly they manipulated; and Wordsworth heard a click.

"Did you feel anything that time?"

"No."

"Didn't really think you would. We'll bind it up now."

"You don't mean to say that's all you're going to do?"

"That's all there is to do," smiled the osteopath. "Except for the after treatments. You'll need about half a dozen. Ionization. Massage. That kind of thing."

He took some cottonwool, wound a bandage over it, fixed a more elaborate sling, and began to talk motorcars.

"I live about twenty miles out of London," he said. "This morning I drove up in a little over thirty minutes. Usually I take the train. One of the troubles about not being qualified is that one can't get extra petrol."

At twenty minutes past eleven, with a final, "Pay me at the end. The damage'll be half a guinea a go. Don't use the fingers more than you can help and don't let anyone bump into you if you can help that either," he escorted his patient to the front door.

His bound wrist no longer gave Wordsworth the least sensation of pain. His mind seemed peculiarly clear. Given the opportunity he could cope with anything. But would he be given the opportunity? If only one could be sure of the actual killer's identity. That was the trouble about hunches. And about playing lone hands.

Jittery again, he hailed a taxi and was driven to King Charles Street. There he went straight to Miss Loftus, who said, "Mr. Silcox did come in this morning but he had to dash off. He won't be back till three o'clock at the earliest."

"Can I get him on the phone?"

"Well, you might be able to."

She gave a number, and Wordsworth hurried to his own room, where he found Guy, dictating letters to Miss King. They were sitting very close together; and, somehow or other, he gathered that his arrival had not been too popular.

"Morning, W.W." Guy drawled, and, "That's pretty well the lot. Will you have them done by lunchtime?"

"Well, hardly. Not with all the copying. But I'll do my best. You won't be lunching in today, I expect, flight lieutenant?"

"No. But I'm coming back."

Miss King smiled toothily and went out.

"How did the bonesetting go, W.W.?"

"Wait a minute. I've got to put a call through."

It took several minutes to get his number; and when Wordsworth was finally put on to the extension Miss Loftus had given him a slightly supercilious female answered, "I'm afraid we've never heard of Mr. Silcox. Would it be some other department? Just wait a moment and I will try to secure the operator's attention."

But the operator, though unusually obliging, failed to locate Ramsay's personal assistant. So there was nothing to be done except telephone Miss Loftus, "Please let me know the moment Mr. Silcox comes in, and don't forget that I want to see Sir George as soon as *he* comes in."

"You sound a bit anxious, W.W." said Guy Conington.

"I am."

Despite all his efforts to control himself, anxiety was growing on Wordsworth; and, accompanying anxiety, he experienced an unusual desire to confide. With no other confidant possible, hadn't he better talk this thing over with Guy, who, as an old acquaintance of Barker's, might be able to persuade him to take action? But could Guy be trusted? Wasn't he a "rare one for the ladies?" On the whole, better not.

So instead—for the need to talk proved uncontrollable—he told Guy about his engagement, and asked him to be best man at the wedding.

"But you haven't told me who the lady is, W.W."

"Her name's Gale Johnson. I don't think you've met her."

"No. But I've spoken to her on the phone, and I know when you met her. Almost to the second, too. Because it's in the dossier. I've often wondered why you went to see her. You didn't put that down."

"Didn't I?" And Wordsworth, thinking, "I must have fallen in love with her at first sight, otherwise I should have," smiled to himself.

"This means," drawled Guy Conington, "that lunch, to say nothing of some pre-prandial libations to Hymen, are on me."

3

Looking back on that lunch—Guy insisted, "Blow expense, we'll go to the Trianon"—Wordsworth occasionally wonders how he could have enjoyed it so much, and why he should have been so calm. He returned to the office, with the last half of a cigar in his mouth, feeling even more calm; and, having extorted yet another promise from Miss Loftus that she would telephone him the moment either Mr. Silcox or Sir George Ramsay came in, demanded "that dossier" once more, just to make certain that his hunch tallied with all the facts. Meanwhile Guy was signing the letters which Miss King had left on his desk.

"Elsie's damn good, you know," he drawled; adding, because he had drunk one brandy too many, "And she hasn't given me a sock on the jaw so far."

"Only because you haven't tried any fun and games with her."

"That's all you know," said Guy Conington—and could have kicked himself for kissing and telling. The half confidence seemed to have a most peculiar effect on Wordsworth. He appeared to be either angry or frightened. He started to say something. But before he could get a word out the telephone rang.

"Good girl," Conington heard. "I'll be down in a minute or two."

What made him say, "By the way, that gun of yours doesn't seem to be in the cupboard, I thought I told you to put it there," is another point about which Wordsworth occasionally wonders.

But all the answer he obtained was, "Sorry, W.W. I'm afraid I forgot all about that."

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

I

ON his way to the lift Wordsworth encountered Leslie Langfordson, who gave him what appeared to be a slightly self-conscious "Good afternoon." Wordsworth's, "Good afternoon to you, sir," did not hold any inflection of contempt. He was no longer interested in Langfordson, or Quaritch, or Dorland. He wasn't really interested in whether Guy kept that American thirty-eight revolver, with which he couldn't shoot for toffee, in the drawer of his desk or in their steel cupboard. Nor did he particularly care how far Guy had pursued his fun and games with Elsie King.

For the moment his interest lay entirely with Silcox, who should be able to tell him something; and with Sir George Ramsay, who would have to listen to him, whether he liked it or no.

Silcox and Miss Loftus were drinking tea.

"Have some," said Silcox without rising. His teeth and complexion looked worse than ever; but the presence of Miss Loftus modified his language. Wordsworth accepted. She went to the door, and called, "Pink, can we have another cup of tea please?"

The messenger answered, "I'll do my best, miss; but I'm afraid it will be rather weak."

Miss Loftus reseated herself at the typewriter table. Something made Wordsworth ask, "Did the missing file turn up?"

"Oh, rather. It was just where Elsie said it would be. In the safe at Sir George's own flat."

Pink brought in a white cup. Miss Loftus said, "Do have

a biscuit, squadron leader." She produced a paper bag from the drawer in the table. Silcox extracted a small round tin from one pocket of his crumpled brown waistcoat, and suggested, "Saccharine? It doesn't run to sugar any more."

Wordsworth accepted both offers, ate, drank and said, "I'd rather talk to you alone if I could, Silcox."

"All right. We'll go to master's room."

In the light of one ceiling lamp, Room Forty Two looked singularly bare. There was nothing on the desk top but a telephone. The six-foot-high metal cylinder, the shellcases and the collection of fuzes had all been removed. Only blank wall spaces with dark edges represented the mysterious graphs.

"We'd better not sit at master's desk, he may be here any time now," went on Silcox, and, hobbling across the carpet, pulled a couple of chairs from under the window, through which graying daylight still showed.

"You heard about poor Dowdy?" began Wordsworth.

"Yes. Ruddy awful. He was a bad-tempered old sod. But he made better tea than Pink ever will. Funny his trying to kill himself. I can't see why anyone bothers to do that nowadays. The Huns'll always oblige."

"Dowdy didn't attempt to commit suicide," said Wordsworth; and watched covertly for the effect.

Silcox only seemed a trifle surprised.

"Really," he remarked; and, running a couple of fingers through his shaggy hair, "You're not trying to tell me someone tried to murder him?"

"There's no doubt about that. Dowdy knew who it was, too. He'd just started to tell me when the bomb got him."

"I say!"

The exclamation only denoted further surprise.

"I happen to have been a policeman," continued Wordsworth. "So naturally I'm rather interested. Besides, it isn't too nice feeling that we've got a murderer running round loose in this Ministry."

"It ruddy well isn't. But I expect Scotland Yard'll find

the fellow pretty soon. I told one of their chaps all I knew about it; which was sweet damn all."

So Silcox didn't know that the Yard had been called off.

"What did the chap ask you?" continued Wordsworth.

"Oh, just when I'd last seen Dowdy, and whether I'd seen anyone suspicious about in the corridor."

"Dowdy said you kicked up a bit of a shindy with him because he was late."

"Why, so I did. I don't believe I told the chap from the Yard that. I've got the world's lousiest memory. Besides, I'm always having a dust-up with somebody. This place gets my philoprogenitive goat."

"Mine, too," thought Wordsworth. But the fact that the personal assistant to a scientist should be so forgetful struck him as a trifle queer. "Can I try to jog your memory?" he asked.

"If you like. I doubt if it'll be much good, though. I had to give evidence in a law case once. The solicitor went over everything with me umpteen times before I went into the witness box. But even that didn't help."

"Queerer and queerer," thought Wordsworth. "Still—the chap may be speaking the truth," and after a little more thought he said, "Dowdy rather suggested you gave him some information, besides having a dust-up with him. Sir George came in late that morning, I believe. Did you by any chance tell Dowdy that he wouldn't be wanting his tea?"

Silcox's expression was that of a man trying to solve the most abstruse clue in a crossword puzzle. "I might have," he said at last. "But I can't be sure. I couldn't swear to it." And to Wordsworth's next question he answered, "Was my master's tea usually served in a yellow cup? I haven't the vaguest idea. Ask him yourself. He ought to know if anyone does."

"Queerer and queerer and queerer," thought Wordsworth. "Is my hunch all wrong? Have I slipped up somewhere?"

But at that moment the telephone rang; and Silcox, having

answered, passed it over, saying, "Conington wants you. He seems to be in rather a state about something."

Less than a minute later Wordsworth threw over his shoulder, "Don't let Sir George go before I've seen him," and ran from Room Forty Two.

2

Fuming, Wordsworth rang the lift bell. Fidgeting, he watched the little lights till the door opened.

"Third floor," he ordered. "And get a move on."

Momentarily all his calmness seemed to have disappeared. Out of the lift, he ran again; flung the door of his own room open.

"There's one round left in the pouch, and that's all," said Guy, holding up the blue webbing equipment he had taken from an open drawer.

"I tell you it was locked," he reiterated in answer to Wordsworth's first question. "I unlocked it myself, just before I phoned you. The revolver's gone, and at least twenty cartridges. Somebody's pinched 'em."

"Hell."

Controlling himself, Wordsworth made sure that his own automatic was still in the cupboard, and bent to examine the drawer, cluttered with a collection of clips, pins, rubber rings and scraps of paper.

"Anything else missing?" he asked.

"No. Nothing."

"Well, yank this out for me, and let's have a squint at the lock."

Conington stood the drawer upright, spilling its contents on the linoleum. Wordsworth examined it. Neither wood nor metal showed any signs of tampering.

"Would a magnifying glass be any help, W.W.? Izod's got one."

"It might be."

Conington went off at the double. "Hunch can't have been

so wrong after all," thought Wordsworth. Izod, magnifying glass in hand, came back with Conington. "It's a funny thing his gun should have been pinched," said Izod. "I hunted for that little thirty-two of mine all day yesterday. But I'd only mislaid it after all."

"Where did you find it?" Wordsworth had taken the glass and was re-examining the lock.

"In my desk. I do keep it there occasionally."

"Loaded?"

"Not much. I don't leave loaded revolvers lying about."

"I didn't leave mine lying about either," put in Conington. "I always keep the key of that drawer on my own ring."

"Well, let's have a squint at that, too."

But the key, examined through the magnifying glass, showed no trace of wax; and just as Wordsworth said, "It needn't have been copied. Any old key might have opened that drawer," the telephone rang; and Conington announced, "Silcox. He says Ramsay's just come in, but he's in rather a hurry, so can you go down at once."

Wordsworth repeated, "Hell"; and stood silent for a while, obviously in two minds.

Then he snapped, "Right. Tell him I'm on my way. The chances are I shan't be back tonight, Guy, and I may not turn up tomorrow morning either."

He demanded his own pistol before he left them. Conington jointed the belt buckle of the webbing for him. Izod attended to the shoulder strap; and, proving less clumsy than the valet, did not jar the slung arm.

"What's he up to now?" asked Izod as the door slammed.

"I'll be sugared if I know," drawled Conington. "But he seems rather het up."

3

George Ramsay sat at his desk on which now lay a dispatch case. By him stood Miss Loftus and Silcox. Pink was just drawing down the blackout blinds. Pink went out.

George Ramsay said, "Hallo, Wordsworth. I shan't be half a minute."

He finished the dictation of a letter, and told Silcox, "Sign it for me, will you? That's about all, I think. I'll look in to say goodbye to you as soon as I'm through with Squadron Leader Wordsworth. Thank you both for all the work you've done. I hope I shall be able to get hold of you again when I come back from the States."

As soon as he and Wordsworth were alone, he said, "You're lucky to catch me. I really only looked in for a couple of documents Silcox has been hunting up for me, and to say farewell to my faithful staff." Only then did he notice the sling, and ask, "How did you hurt your arm?"

Wordsworth's answer brought full concentration to those gray-green eyes under that broad penthouse of a forehead.

"Nobody told me Dowdy was dead," said Ramsay. "I've been away since first thing Saturday."

"But you knew he'd been poisoned, Sir George?"

"All I know is that he was taken to hospital, and that the police made some inquiries."

"Then you were here on Friday?"

"Only for an hour or so. The police didn't ask me anything."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yes. If you're not too long about it." The scarred face showed displeasure; pointedly, Ramsay took out his watch. "These last few days have been pretty harassing. And I've a lot to do at home. I haven't even started packing yet."

"If *you* won't listen to me, Sir George," began Wordsworth, and he stressed the "you" deliberately, "you may never get home, far less start your packing."

"What on earth"—sheer surprise made Ramsay's voice grate—"do you mean by that?"

"I'll tell you, if you'll answer my question. It's quite a simple one. But neither Mr. Silcox nor Miss Loftus *appear*"—again Wordsworth's stressing of the word "*appear*" was deliberate—"able to give me a straight negative or a straight

affirmative. I gather that you are in the habit of taking a cup of tea most mornings. Was it Dowdy's habit to bring you that tea in a yellow cup?"

"Yes, I told him to. The white ones are nearly all chipped, and I hate chipped china," answered Ramsay without the slightest hesitation.

"Dowdy drank from a yellow cup," said Wordsworth, also without hesitation. "And if I hadn't been lucky enough to find a doctor, he'd have been dead before the ambulance reached the hospital."

George Ramsay ejaculated, "My God."

Silence hung between them. Ramsay's eyes showed that his imagination was working. And, "I wonder if you remember," continued Wordsworth, "something you said in Room Twenty Eight the very first time I met you. You said, 'This room used to be mine. So it might just as well have been me.' Well, it was meant to be you. Both times. And now there's a revolver missing. I was only told about that a few minutes ago. Don't you agree with me that it's rather, shall we say, significant?"

Ramsay's big body stiffened in the chair. The pupils of his gray-green eyes had contracted to needlepoints. One hand felt for the paper cutter which had always lain on his desk, and came away empty. Again silence hung between them, till he broke it with a quiet, "Of course, I am rather worth killing. What do you suggest we should do about it?"

Wordsworth meditated for a moment. Then, encouraged by that, "What do you suggest," he spoke his full mind; and George Ramsay listened to him—as neither Dorland, nor Quaritch, nor Scrope-Tarleton, nor even Barker—had been willing to listen. And when he had finished Ramsay said, "I feel you're right. The wheels of bureaucracy grind very slowly—and the powers-that-be may not believe either of us till it's too late. I've a gun of my own at my flat. We'll do turn and turn about. It'll only be for a few hours anyway. Do you mind if I put one telephone call through? Then we'll be off."

The number for which Ramsay asked was Millicent Ashdown's. "Quite so, Parkins," he said. "I know she isn't at home. Kindly tell her, when she comes in, that I'll meet her at the aerodrome. Yes. I know that too. But I do not wish her to call for me in the car. She is to go direct to the aerodrome. Write that down please. And read it back to me . . . Thank you."

"Then they're flying you direct, Sir George?" asked Wordsworth.

"Yes. As soon as it's light. So our vigil won't be very long. And now I'll just go and say goodbye to my faithful Miss Loftus and my faithful Silcox."

"All right. Only let me go first, Sir George."

"The faithful bodyguard," smiled George Ramsay, picking up his coat and hat.

4

Feeling a trifle too much like an actor in melodrama, Wordsworth snapped open the press-button of his holster and slipped the flap under the butt of his automatic. Then he preceded George Ramsay from Room Forty Two; and peered each way of the corridor. The corridor, dim under its A.R.P. lighting, was empty. "All right," he said. Again George Ramsay smiled.

The door of the next room stood ajar. Ramsay went in.

Wordsworth remained at the doorway. "Worth killing, I should say so, with that brain," he brooded. "And Ashdown wasn't. Ashdown was only a four-letter man with an enlarged sex appetite. Why didn't I think of that sooner? Who stole Guy's gun? That's pretty obvious. But who's going to pull the trigger? That isn't quite so obvious. At least, I hope it isn't. I should simply hate to . . ."

Thought vanished, leaving his brain icy cold. Ramsay had already shaken hands with Miss Loftus. Now he was shaking hands with Silcox. "Ready," he said. And a last premonition came to Wordsworth as they walked out into the corridor again, and along it towards the main entrance.

At the foot of the stairs leading down to the main entrance, stood a corporal of R.A.F. police, who carried a Webley forty-five at his left hip. The corporal saluted smartly. Wordsworth touched his fore-and-aft cap in acknowledgment. Nearer the door stood a messenger.

"Can you get us a taxi?" asked Wordsworth.

"Sorry, sir, but I can't leave the door."

"Anyone else you can send?"

"I'm afraid not, sir." The messenger looked at the corporal. "We're neither of us allowed to leave, sir."

"We'll pick one up outside," said Ramsay; and pushed by, was out into King Charles Street before his self-appointed bodyguard could protest.

Wordsworth joined him at once. The abrupt transition from light to darkness blinded both of them. Wordsworth's sight began to clear. "Please go back, Sir George. I'll fetch the taxi," he began.

"Oh, come. It's no good being too windy."

Was one being too windy? Hadn't something moved? A figure? Over there. In the shadows. On the other side of the roadway. Nonsense. Only imagination. Was it though? No, by jingo. Not imagination.

In the split seconds that followed, the figure ran at them, the figure's hand lifted—and Wordsworth fired from the hip.

He fired twice; and was just aware of a third shot—of a bullet splattering against stonework. The figure staggered, fell on its face in the roadway. Ramsay came by him before he could slip pistol into holster. He saw Ramsay stoop to the figure; kneel, turn it over, lift its head from the roadway. He could not see the expression of complete horror, of utter incredulity on George Ramsay's face.

He joined Ramsay again. He, too knelt. He heard what Ramsay wanted to do. He heard himself say, "No. No. There may not be time," and, "Who put you up to this? Who gave you the shell? Who gave you the poison? Baron Kovac? Come clean. Come clean, will you, Elsie King?"

But Elsie King only choked, "*Scheibenkleister . . . Mutti*

. . . *Mutti . . . Komme gleich . . . Rache . . . Fur'n lieben Vater . . . Rache.*"

Then the blood gushed—and he realised that he had killed Elsie King—and that people were crowding out to them through the doorway—and that Ramsay had picked up Elsie King's body and was carrying it through the doorway—and that he had followed Ramsay inside—and that his right hand was holding this revolver he had picked up and just broken open—and that this face, staring at him from among all the other faces, this face with the look of complete horror, of utter incredulity blanching it, must be the face of Guy Conington.

"Sorry, Guy," he heard himself say. "Your gun, isn't it? One round's been fired. She dropped it when I shot her. I really am sorry, old chap. But there was nothing else I could do."

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

I

SOME days later as he drove Minnie Mouse slowly through Tapworth town, Wordsworth's thoughts repeated to him, "There was nothing else I could do." And for good measure he added, "Blast it all," speaking the words aloud.

Gale—bless her—didn't like him to swear. He'd been given leave, too. And Quaritch, at their very last interview, had said, "Stout work. A bit irregular, of'course. But stout work all the same, Wordsworth. Take it from me, I'm going to do my damndest to find you a better job. A week off? Why not? You've deserved it. Just bung the form in."

But could one quite trust Steve Quaritch? One certainly had given him a packet of trouble. Halleluia. Why worry about that? Tomorrow would be Christmas Eve. Tomorrow one was getting married. Funny of Gale to go all prudish, not to let one stay tonight at the Cottage. Quite right, though. Bless her again. People did talk in a village. And Frank Izod would be sure to make one jolly comfortable. Probably make one a bit tight, too. Did himself jolly well, did Izod. Sporting of him, to offer to be best man when Guy threw his hand in. Been in love with Gale himself. Yes. Jolly sporting. What a silly ass Guy had made of himself with his, "I'm sorry. But let me off, there's a good chap. I should be thinking of Elsie all the time. Poor kid. How you could bring yourself to shoot a woman?" As though one liked shooting women!

And once again Wordsworth's thoughts repeated, "What else could I do?"

Michael ran to the door of Manor Cottage shouting, "Hallo, father. That's what mummy says I'll have to call you after tomorrow." Gale, just behind him, said, "He'll beat you if you don't learn not to shout, you little ragamuffin."

"Oh, no, he won't, mummy. You won't let him."

Laughing, Wordsworth kissed them both, and gave Gale the box he was carrying in his left hand, still a bit weak, but quite serviceable.

"For tomorrow," he told her.

Gale closed the front door, lifted the lid of the box, and said, "Lordy. Orchids. A whole spray. It's a good thing I insisted on keeping my job, William." Wordsworth laughed again; and again they kissed.

"These had better go in the ice box," she continued. "I see you've put on plain clothes. If you wear them tomorrow, I just shan't marry you."

"You won't escape as easily as that. My uniform's in one of my suitcases."

"I bet you don't know which one."

She was right there, bless her. The valet had packed for him.

"You win," he smiled; and she went off to put the flowers in the refrigerator.

"It'll be funny having a father again," said Michael. "I don't remember my other one."

"Have to tell him about his father one day. Nasty fence to jump," thought Wordsworth, fondling that reddish brown head. "But it's no use jumping 'em till one comes to 'em."

Gale returned to say, "Tea's ready. By the way, Frank said he could get away early and pick you up here. He's had a new officer posted to his section, you know."

"Yes. I know that. Boulte's going back to the Regiment."

"*The* regiment?"

"The Gunners," explained Wordsworth. "They're always called that."

How British the man was, bless him. How little he'd told her about *the* murder. (To herself, Gale always called it "*the* murder.") But she'd make him tell her the rest this afternoon.

The three of them were still standing in the hall. Eliza Bigland appeared with the teatray. Wordsworth said, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Bigland"; and opened the sitting room door for her.

Gale said, "You're having yours in the kitchen, Michael."

"Oh, mummy, must I?"

"Yes. You must."

3

Michael shrugged his thin shoulders with one of Gale's very own gestures. Eliza Bigland, having deposited her tray by the fireside, led him away. Wordsworth took Gale's arm, bare and thrilling to touch.

"I adore you," he said.

Gale laughed.

They sat down, side by side, on the chintz-covered sofa. Daylight lasted while they ate and drank. Gale lit a cigarette. "We might draw the curtains," she pronounced.

"'We' being your prospective bridegroom."

"Of course."

He did her bidding, thinking, "There's going to be quite a lot of that but she's worth it"; and reseated himself beside her.

"Well," she asked, "has anything more happened at the Ministry?"

"No. Things seem to have settled down since I got my leave. About time, too. I've never known such a song and dance. From the way everybody went for me, including the Provost Marshal, I might have been an enemy agent myself. If George Ramsay hadn't made that statement before he caught his plane, the chances are I'd have been in the Tower like the famous major."

"He and his Millicent will be in the States by now."

"Do you wish we were going there?"

Gale brooded, brows crinkling, golden brown eyes on the fire.

"No," she said at last. "Definitely. But I'd like to be there the day they declare war."

"You think they will then?"

"They must." Gale's right hand clenched. "This world's got to be made fit for human beings to live in. And even England can't do that alone."

Wordsworth also brooded. "You're right," he said at last. "But even alone, we'll never be beaten."

Secretly, she doubted that; but was too wise to say so. Besides, she wanted to know more about *the* murder.

"But I've told you pretty well everything I know for certain," he protested when she asked her opening question. "Elsie King must have planted that phony shell in the locker under the window of Room Twenty Eight in order to kill Ramsay, before she knew he was moving out of it. By the time she did know, Ashdown had had his special lock fitted."

"But wouldn't a shell like that be much too heavy for a girl to carry?" interrupted Gale.

"No. She was a hefty young woman, and a three-inch shell only weighs a little over sixteen pounds."

"How did she get it, though? Wouldn't a thing like that take a lot of making?"

Wordsworth brooded once more. Should a man tell his wife everything? Still, Gale had a right to know most things about this particular business. After all, if it hadn't been for their night at the Trianon . . .

"We don't actually know where she got it from," he answered. "But I'm pretty well sure she got it—and the poison—from Mrs. Reggie's boy friend, Baron Kovac. The shell was a good effort. Nice timing too. The Huns must have made a special raid that night. But the poison wasn't so good. She ought to have made certain Ramsay would be in before she put the stuff in his teacup. And I fancy she let Dowdy see

her doing it, only he didn't twig what she was up to till too late. Presumably she was pretty desperate by then. She must have known Ramsay was going to America. And she must have been absolutely desperate when she took Izod's gun and found there weren't any cartridges in it. Pretty clever of her, though, to put that gun back and take Guy's instead. The baron did a bunk within two hours of my talk with Mrs. Reggie. But Mrs. Reggie's in quod all right: and I bet she's hating it. She'll talk more before they're through with her too. She's already admitted that she knew Elsie King in Paris."

"But how did you know about Elsie King?" Again Gale interrupted.

"I didn't actually know," admitted Wordsworth. "Not till Guy's gun was pinched. Then it stuck out a foot, because I'd heard her ask him if he'd be out to luncheon. But I'd had a pretty shrewd suspicion about her, and about Mrs. Reggie and her boy friend, ever since that night you and I went to the Trianon."

Wordsworth paused to light a cigarette. "Do you remember," he went on, "when Mrs. Reggie took us over to her boy friend's table? Well, Elsie King had just been talking to him. Probably she'd seen Guy's report to Dorland—they see most things in the typing pool—and thought he ought to know immediately. It isn't far from the Air Ministry to the Trianon. She had a camel's hair coat on, a silk handkerchief over her head and a pair of blue slacks. Barker found them when he searched her room at St. Catherine's Court."

"But if you recognised her then," for the third time Gale interrupted the flow of narrative, "why didn't you do something about it?"

"Recognise any girl in that get-up, twenty yards away with her back to me! My sweet, I don't believe I'd even be certain of you at that distance. And now, don't you think you've made me talk quite enough shop?"

"No," said Gale decisively. "Because you haven't told me what interests most. Why did she do it, William? Just be-

cause she was paid to? Somehow I can't believe that. Just think of the risks she took."

"You're quite right." Wordsworth, as was his habit when trying to make any point completely clear, spoke very slowly. "She didn't do it for money. That was why she made such a perfect tool. She did it for revenge, poor girl. Mrs. Reggie told Scotland Yard enough about her for them to piece the rest together.

"Elsie's father's name," he went on, "was König. He changed it to King when he was naturalised—a year or two before nineteen-fourteen. He served—on our side—in the last war. But soon afterwards he blotted his copybook—blackmail—and got ten years for it. Just before he blotted his copybook he'd married. He died in gaol; and the news killed his wife, who was also a naturalised German. Elsie was about eleven then; and her mother must have told her a garbled version of the story. It would have been easy to work on a girl like that. They're always easy when they've an imaginary grievance. Mrs. Reggie admits she was a kind of tout for possible agents. She probably began by telling the wretched girl that she herself didn't care very much for English people."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Gale. "She tried that game on with me. Thanks for telling me so much, darling. I think you've been awfully clever." And kissing him she concluded:

"Instead of kicking up a song and dance, as you call it, the people at the Air Ministry ought to be jolly grateful to you for saving a life as valuable to them as Ramsay's. I'm sure they are, too. I'm positive you'll get that better job Quaritch promised you."

4

Frank Izod, however, who drove up in his Rolls-Bentley soon afterwards, and insisted on taking them to dine at the Tapworth Hotel ("because that brother-in-law of mine has invited his brother to dinner at my house, and between the two of them they'll bore us stiff"), was not quite so sure of

Quaritch; and said so, alone with Wordsworth in his study, after they had taken Gale back to the Cottage.

He, too, insisted on being told the whole story, over several of the best liqueur brandies Wordsworth had ever drunk.

They were calling each other Bill and Frank by then.

"You've upset a lot of applecarts, Bill," pronounced Izod. "*And* you've shot a girl. That sort of thing doesn't go down too well in this country. We've still got our kid gloves on. When we take 'em off, we may start giving the Huns the drubbing they deserve. But meanwhile—don't be too disappointed if you're not made a wing commander."

"I'm not as keen on promotion as all that," said William Wordsworth, thinking of the morrow. And for one blissful week, he never even thought of the Air Ministry.

Only on the last evening of his leave, by which time he and Gale were home again, did the delivery of a telegram addressed to "Flight Lieutenant W. Wordsworth, Manor Cottage, Little Tapworth" recall it sharply to his mind.

Reading those first two words, he swore for the first time since their wedding day; and, after he had opened the envelope, he gave vent to several more oaths, fortunately in a tongue which Gale did not understand.

He gave the telegram to Gale.

"But what does this mean, darling?" she asked.

"Mean!" he began; then:

"Well, first, my pet, it means that Steve Quaritch don't want no trouble. In other words, that he doesn't feel he'll be happy with your beloved husband anywhere within miles of him. Secondly it means the loss of the half ring on my jacket, and quite a wad of pay, to say nothing of my Air Ministry allowance. Thirdly, it means precisely what it says. That Flight Lieutenant W. Wordsworth, having been demoted instead of promoted, will report forthwith to an aerodrome, which is fortunately not too far away, for certain duties about which he hasn't been told a damn thing and for which his particular qualifications may be of no use whatever."

"But, William," burst out Gale, "you're not going to stand

for that, are you? Not after all you did. And with all of them trying to stop you, too."

His bride's partisanship was very sweet to Wordsworth. Lovingly he laid a hand on her shoulder.

"It does smell a bit, doesn't it?" he said in his own vernacular. "Still, what can a chap do?"

"I know what I'd do," flared Gale. "I'd tell them where they got off first, and then I'd insist on resigning my commission."

Still with his hand on his bride's shoulder, that individualistic Wordsworth whom poetry-loving parents had christened William ruminated for a long while, and there was nothing poetic, or so it seemed to him, in his evil-tempered ruminations.

Finally he said, "I wouldn't do that, even if I could. I didn't join up again for what I could get out of it. I joined up again to help win this war. The fact that I happen to have run into a little crowd of non-belligerents at the Air Ministry doesn't mean there's anything really wrong with the fighting side of the R.A.F. So although they have given me one of the lousiest, dirtiest deals . . ."

"Don't spoil it," interrupted Gale, laying a finger on his lips to stop him. "Don't spoil it by losing your temper, William, my darling. You really are such a grand person."

Because to her it seemed as though he had just spoken for all England, for that nation of silent poets she had never quite understood.

THE END

